Foundations of Early Childhood Education

Foundations of Early Childhood Education

KATIE STEFFES, MS, NBCT; NORA ZIBURSKI, EDD; AMANDA DOHMS, MSED; MARY BETH BOETTCHER, MSED; TRACY JACOBSON, MSED; CHRISTINE SPANG, MSED; SARA HORSTMAN, BS; AND VICKI TANCK, MSED

WISTECH OPEN

Foundations of Early Childhood Education Copyright © 2025 by WisTech Open is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, except where otherwise noted.

Contents

Overview 1

About Foundations of Early Childhood Education 1

Using the Digital Textbook 1

Acknowledgment of Support and Disclaimer 2

Acknowledgments 3

Introduction to Foundations of Early Childhood Education iv

Chapter 1: Embracing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Early Childhood Education: Building Foundations for Belonging 5

Katie Steffes, MS, NBCT

1.1 Introduction 5

1.2 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging 7

1.3 Why is Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Important in Early Childhood Education? 9

1.4 What is Anti-Bias Education? 13

1.5 Integrating Anti-Bias Education 20

1.6 Conclusion 26

1.7 Learning Activities 27

1.8 References 27

Chapter 2: Tracing the Roots and Shaping the Future: The History and Trends of Early Childhood Education 30

Vicki Tanck, MSEd

2.1 Introduction 30

2.2 Origins of Early Childhood Education 31

2.3 Current Trends and Their Impact 79

2.4 Legislative Acts 87

2.5 Conclusion 99

2.6 Learning Activities 101

2.7 References 101

Chapter 3: Exploring Early Childhood Education Settings: A Guide to Diverse Learning Environments 107

Nora Ziburski, EdD

3.1 Introduction 107

3.2 Settings 108

3.3 Programming for Each Stage of Development 124

3.4 Conclusion 133

3.5 Learning Activities 134

3.6 References 134

Chapter 4: Exploring Regulatory Requirements: Early Childhood Education Programs in Wisconsin 138

Amanda Dohms, MSEd

4.1 Introduction 138

4.2 Licensed vs. Certified Childcare 139

4.3 Group Childcare Regulatory Requirements 140

4.4 Family Childcare Regulatory Requirements 145

4.5 School-Aged Childcare Regulatory Requirements 150

4.6 Conclusion 150

4.7 Learning Activities 151

4.8 References 152

Chapter 5: Identifying Quality Indicators: Ensuring Excellence in Early Childhood Education Programs 153

Mary Beth Boettcher, MSEd

5.1 Introduction 153

5.2 Developmentally Appropriate Practice 154

5.3 Accreditation 158

5.4 YoungStar 162

5.5 Environmental Rating Scales 164

5.6 Conclusion 166

5.7 Learning Activities 167

5.8 References 167

Chapter 6: Summarizing the Responsibilities: Early Childhood Education Professionals in Action 169

Tracy Jacobson, MSEd

6.1 Introduction 169

6.2 Job Positions in Early Childhood Education 170

6.3 Roles and Responsibilities in Job Positions 172

6.4 Professional Behaviors 178

6.5 Ethical Responsibilities 187

6.6 Advocacy 191

6.7 Professional Competencies 195

6.8 Conclusion 196

6.9 Learning Activities 197

6.10 References 197

Chapter 7: Exploring Early Childhood Curriculum Models: Approaches to Supporting Young Learners 199

Christine Spang, MSEd

7.1 Introduction 199

7.2 Curriculum in Early Childhood Education 200

7.3 Approaches to Curriculum 209

7.5 Conclusion 223

7.6 Learning Activities 224

7.7 References 225

Chapter 8: The Power of Play: Enhancing Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education 228

Sara Horstman, BS

8.1 Introduction 228

8.2 Importance of Play 229

8.3 Piaget's Stages of Play and How Children Play 232

8.4 Facilitating Play 236

8.5 The Role of Play in Children's Learning and Development 240

8.6 The Teaching Cycle 242

8.7 Hands-on Learning Developing in All Areas 246

8.8 Conclusion 247

8.9 Learning Activities 248

8.10 References 249

Overview

ABOUT FOUNDATIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Foundations of Early Childhood Education is an introductory textbook that provides a comprehensive overview of the principles and practices of early childhood education (ECE) for children from birth to 8 years old. It covers key topics such as child development, learning theories, curriculum planning, and the role of play in early learning. The book also emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive, culturally responsive environments that support the diverse needs of young children and their families. Designed for aspiring early childhood educators, this resource offers practical strategies and foundational knowledge to help students prepare for careers in childcare, preschool, or early elementary education. It is an essential guide for anyone entering the field of ECE.

USING THE DIGITAL TEXTBOOK

The following video provides a quick overview of how to navigate the digital version of the textbook:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=4#oembed-1

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SUPPORT AND DISCLAIMER

This book was developed through the WisTech Open project and supported by funds from the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). However, this content does not necessarily represent the policy of WTCS, and you should not assume endorsement by the state or federal government. More information about the WisTech Open project can be found at wistechopen.org.

Acknowledgments

This textbook is the result of many collaborative efforts, and I am deeply grateful to those who supported its development. It is our hope that this resource will support educators, students, and caregivers in building a solid foundation of knowledge and developmentally appropriate practices that nurture young children's development.

I am incredibly grateful to the contributing authors and peer reviewers whose passion for high-quality early childhood education shaped this book in powerful ways. Your thoughtful feedback and expertise brought each chapter to life and gave the content a richness it could not have had without you. Your voices anchored this work in what truly matters: the experiences of children and those who care for them. You reminded me why this work is so important.

I am especially thankful to the WisTech Open team, whose collaboration and behind-the-scenes dedication brought this project to life. Your care and attention ensured the final product was accurate, accessible, and engaging.

To my family, friends, and mentors—thank you for your patience, love, and belief in me throughout this journey. A heartfelt thank you to my colleagues at Chippewa Valley Technical College who cheered me on, shared ideas, and reminded me why this work matters. Your encouragement meant more than you know.

This textbook reflects the shared vision of many individuals who are passionate about early childhood education. I am honored to have had the opportunity to bring their contributions together in one place.

Introduction to Foundations of Early Childhood Education

When Jamal volunteered at a local childcare center during his senior year of high school, he was not sure what to expect. He thought he would mostly be helping kids zip their coats or pour juice. But one day, he saw something that changed the way he thought about early childhood education (ECE). A toddler was struggling to stack blocks, getting more frustrated with each failed attempt. An educator knelt beside him, patiently modeling how to build a stable base, encouraging him without taking over. Minutes later, the boy beamed as he built his tallest tower yet. Jamal realized this was not just babysitting—it was powerful, intentional work that helped children grow in confidence, problem-solving, and independence.

Foundations of Early Childhood Education is your entry point into that meaningful work. Whether you are just beginning to explore this field or already have experience with children, this course will give you a strong understanding of how early learning environments support the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development of young children. You will learn about the history of the profession, guiding principles of developmentally appropriate practice, and the vital role educators play in shaping young lives. Like Jamal, you will come to see that ECE is not just a job—it is a foundation for everything that follows.

Chapter 1: Embracing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Early Childhood Education: Building Foundations for Belonging

KATIE STEFFES, MS, NBCT

Course Competency: *Explore the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the early childhood profession*

Learning Objectives:

- Define anti-bias education and other relevant terms
- Follow the guidelines of "Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves" or a similar resource

1.1 INTRODUCTION

"You've made this day a special day, by just being you. There's no person in the whole world like you. And I like you just the way you are." Fred Rogers, or Mr. Rogers as millions of children knew him, used this quote to testify to the Senate on PBS funding on May 1, 1969, in support of early childhood education (ECE) on PBS. This statement is important because Mr. Rogers believed that every child, no matter where they lived, what

they looked like, or who their family was, should feel loved and that they belong.

View the following YouTube video to see Fred Rogers' statement:

Fred Rogers testifies before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications

Early childhood educators all over the world are aware of how unique and special each child is and what they have to offer. The essential work of all early childhood educators is to give children the courage, confidence, and competence to understand who they are—both as individuals and as members of society. In order for children to learn and be aware of this very diverse world, early childhood educators need to be willing to examine their own identities, biases, and cultures, as well as the historical trauma of marginalized populations around the world.

Not everyone will feel the same doing this important work. Empathy, understanding, and listening with open hearts and minds are a few ways to have difficult conversations and go beyond the surface level. People may have feelings varying from uncomfortable, confident, angry, or powerless. Lean into those feelings and always wonder "Why?" Asking that question will bring about solutions to misunderstandings. A valuable aspect of inclusion is that no one will ever have all the answers; rather, it is a continuous journey of growing and developing. As new conversations and experiences arise, this ongoing reflection will continue to shape ECE into a more inclusive, equitable, and just field—guided by open minds and open hearts.

1.2 DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING

Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. Belonging. Individually these four words pack a punch. Used together, they complement one another and expand our views and how we treat each other. According to the Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019a), these terms are defined as follows:

Diversity: Variation among individuals, as well as within and across groups of individuals, in terms of their backgrounds and lived experiences. These experiences are related to social identities, including race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social and economic status, religion, ability status, and country of origin.

Equity: The state that would be achieved if individuals fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. In practice, equity means all children and families receive necessary supports in a timely fashion so that they can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential.

Inclusion: Embodied by the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and their family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society.

According to the Early Care & Learning Council, **belonging** is defined as creating a culture where people can be themselves, have psychological safety, appreciate each other, and feel part of something bigger (2024). Review the definitions in Figure 1a.



Figure 1a: DEIB chart.

Additional Resource

There are many more definitions related to diversity, equity,

inclusion, and belonging. Please see the definitions from the NAEYC Position Statement (2019b) below.

- NAEYC Definitions

1.3 WHY IS DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING IMPORTANT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

There are some people who may question why teaching children about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging is important. The thought may be that children do not see differences in others because they have not yet had enough life experiences to shape bias or prejudice. However, children are naturally observant and begin to notice similarities and differences in the people around them early in life. These observations influence how they understand and relate to others, making it essential to guide their learning in inclusive and respectful ways from the start.

Importance for Children

High-quality early childhood programs promote children's development and opportunities for success as they move from elementary school to adolescence and eventually adulthood. Children who feel they belong and have a strong sense of self have also been positively linked to self-esteem, well-being, and mental health. Some predictors of belonging in schools and programs include the school environment, safety, teacher

support and caring, family support, and peer relationships (Slaten et al., 2016). Families in America continue to increase in diversity. In particular, we are seeing an increase in the variety of family compositions, which includes multiracial families; adoptive families; and families with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) parents (Frost & Goldberg, 2019). According to Wilson & Bouton (2024), approximately 5 million children in the United States are being raised by an LGBTQ+ parent. In addition, more than 2 million children in the United States are adopted and, of those children, approximately 25% have parents who are of different races than they are (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014).

> U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said that "all students deserve access to safe, supportive schools and classrooms. Discrimination and use of exclusionary discipline can negatively impact students' abilities to learn, grow and thrive." (Blad, 2021, para. 5)

Everyone has biases. It is important to recognize and work to understand your own. Bias can appear in many forms—whether related to gender, race, language, socioeconomic status, ability, or culture—and everyone can relate to experiencing bias being used against them at some point. In fact, bias exists in many everyday areas, from sports team loyalties to preferences for clothing brands. It is important to distinguish bias from prejudice. Prejudice is showing unfair favor of or against a person, group, or thing compared to another, often in a negative way (Kelly et al., 2025). For example, if someone simply prefers sweet food over spicy food, that is a personal preference or judgment. However, if that same person dismisses an ethnic cuisine as "gross" based on the assumption it is spicy—without ever trying it or learning about it from someone knowledgeable—that crosses the line into prejudice.

Reflect

1. Reflect on a time when you have been treated unfairly or have gotten an unexpected response from someone else.
2. Did the unexpected response feel like bias? In what way(s)?

Implicit bias (also known as unconscious bias) includes subconscious feelings, attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes that individuals develop based on prior influences and imprints through their lives. Individuals are unaware that these subconscious thoughts impact their decision making (Shah, 2023). Implicit bias can have detrimental effects in ECE. According to the Civil Rights Data Collection, Office of Civil Rights from the U.S. Department of Education, Black preschoolers were twice more likely to be suspended or expelled from preschool programs than their share of the total preschool population in 2017–2018, and American Indian/Alaska Native and multiracial children were one and a half more likely to be suspended or expelled from preschool programs than their share of the total preschool population in 2017–2018 (2021). See Discipline Practices in Preschool PDF for more information.

Additional Resources

Resources on expulsion:

- Reducing Suspension and Expulsion Practices in Early Childhood Settings
- Project Implicit Tests

Importance for Early Childhood Educators

With the changing demographics of the United States and the increase in the diversity of children and their families in early childhood programs, it is important to look at the diversity in early childhood professionals. According to Schneider and Gibbs (2023), an estimated 97% of early childhood educators are women, with 38% identifying as Black women. This representation is disproportionate compared to the broader workforce, where non-Hispanic Black women make up 16.7%, Hispanic women 16.4%, and women of other racial and ethnic backgrounds make up only 4.9%. Having a diverse staff with varied lived experiences helps families feel reflected and affirmed within the early childhood environment.

Staff diversity can provide a racial and/or cultural match between children and families and a greater understanding of social and cultural behaviors to provide an improved and individualized learning environment. Employing staff who speak the same home language of children in early childhood programs is the first step in providing high-quality teaching and learning experiences for children in their care, and can be an effective tool to provide collaboration and engagement with families.

No matter what the staff looks like or the languages they speak, ongoing professional development is essential to help build the knowledge and skills to serve diverse communities and promote equity. All early childhood educators should reflect on personal culture, values, and practices, as well as learn about others' perspectives and experiences. If challenging situations arise, early childhood educators should help each other by having courageous conversations that examine the assumptions, beliefs, and biases. Strengths-based approaches to working with children and families should be prioritized and practiced throughout the program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families, 2024). These approaches focus on recognizing and building upon the unique assets, identities, and contributions that each child, family, and staff member brings to the

learning environment, fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and empowerment. For example, a program may serve a large number of bilingual children and families. During a staff meeting, educators discuss how to better support these families and realize that classroom materials and communication home are only in English. Instead of viewing this as a barrier, the team engages in a courageous conversation about how language reflects culture and identity. They decide to incorporate bilingual books, label classroom items in multiple languages, and invite family members to share stories and songs from their home cultures. To deepen this work, educators reach out to families through surveys and informal conversations to learn about the languages spoken at home, cultural traditions, and preferred methods of communication. They create opportunities for families to contribute to classroom life—such as reading a book in their home language, cooking a traditional dish with the children, or displaying family photos in the classroom. These efforts foster mutual respect, strengthen family partnerships, and create a welcoming environment where every child and family feels seen, valued, and empowered.

Building diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging requires reciprocal relationships that have social connections and are built on positive relationships. Early childhood educators serve a unique role of engaging with families of young children and building trust and a sense of community to set their children up for a lifetime of learning and academic success. To advance a more equitable and inclusive early childhood environment, anti-bias movements in education are practiced across the United States.

1.4 WHAT IS ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION?

Anti-bias education (ABE) is a practice that supports children and their

families as they develop a sense of identity in a diverse society. To be an effective practice, ABE should be interwoven in the entire early childhood program, from professional development to interactions with children, families, coworkers, and the classroom environment. It shapes how the curriculum is put together every day (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2019). In Table 1a, you will find the four goals of ABE according to Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards (2019).

Table 1a

Four Goals of Anti-Bias Education (ABE)	
Goal 1: Identity	• Educators 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	• Educators will promote each child's comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds. • Children will 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	• Educators will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and will 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	• Educators will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for 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.

Goal 1: Identity

Everyone has many identities, whether they admit it, are confused by it, or deny it. Identities are personal and social. Personal identity is often thought of as self-competence, self-confidence, or self-concept. Social identity refers to how society defines people based on the social groups they are a part of. Some example categories of social identity include culture, economic class, family structure, gender, language, race, religion, sexual orientation, and more. “Every social identity has societal policies, stereotypes, and attitudes connected with it” (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p 22). These identities cross over into different parts of our lives. This overlap of identities is called intersectionality. This is important to remember because the overlapping identities can also have overlapping privileges or disadvantages. For example, a boy who is African American, poor, and does not speak English may have disadvantages because of bias and prejudice. The way early childhood educators interact with children and families can build identities up or can break them down. If educators can nourish and support these growing identities, the outcome is more likely to be children growing up with a feeling of belonging.

Activity

Complete the Social Identity Wheel PDF, developed by the University of Michigan, and reflect on the questions in the middle of the activity.

Goal 2: Diversity

Diversity is an embedded element of society. This anti-bias goal

empowers early childhood educators to promote interactions with others from diverse backgrounds with empathy and respect. Children must learn positive and respectful ways to compare and contrast human differences in order to be comfortable with diversity. Children are observers, and they often ask unfiltered questions and respond with blunt comments. Early childhood educators must present diversity as a strength, worthy of conversation and explanation. Addressing and encouraging children to speak, question, and learn about others builds empathy in themselves and others. Talking about differences does not cause prejudice. “Prejudice is learned from prejudice, not from learning about human differences” (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 24). This goal also addresses the similarities between humans as well. By appreciating both difference and similarity, children learn that all humans, no matter their differences, have commonalities and how we treat each other matters.

Goal 3: Justice

Fairness often comes up in early childhood classrooms. What children perceive as fair or unfair is largely based on how people treat each other. Goal 3 is about building that sense of fairness with empathy. Children can sort fair and unfair responses when talking about sharing or taking turns. They can sort what is kind or unkind when asked about bullying or helping. This knowledge is constructed with everyday experiences and interactions beginning at birth. Early childhood educators promote critical thinking skills early on by facilitating connections, modeling interactions, and by practicing using skills to identify unfair comments, untrue images, and unkind behaviors directed at them or others (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 25). Through this intentional teaching, children learn how to form caring relationships with others while acknowledging diversity.

Goal 4: Activism

Children's and educators' skills in this area are built on the foundation of identity, diversity, and justice in the first three goals (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 26). Teaching children to stand up and take action against unfair or hurtful behavior must be intentional and have a goal for children to feel empowered to act. How to communicate and address the injustices they see are skills children can learn with the help of empathetic early childhood educators. Children are hurt by more than aggressive behavior. Name-calling, teasing, and excluding someone based on their identity, as well as a lack of representation in books and materials, chip away at a child's self-concept. Early childhood educators have a duty to not only intervene and model the prosocial interactions but also help teach skills to speak up when something is wrong.

The four core goals of ABE are meant to provide support for children to identify and prevent, as much as possible, the harmful impacts of societal prejudice and bias. On pages 8–9 of the book *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children & Ourselves* (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020), the vision of ABE is identified below:

- All children and families have a sense of belonging and experience affirmation of their personal and social identities and their cultural ways of being.
- All children have access to and participate in the education they need to become successful, contributing members of society.
- All children are engaged in joyful learning that supports their cognitive, physical, creative, and social development.
- Children and adults know how to respectfully and easily live, learn, and work together in diverse and inclusive environments. All families have the resources they need to fully nurture their children.
- All children and families live in safe, peaceful, healthy, comfortable housing and neighborhoods.

This vision of ABE also reflects the basic human rights described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

- The right to survival.
- The right to develop to the fullest.
- The right to protection from harmful influences, abuse, and/or exploitation.
- The right to participate fully in family, cultural, and social life.

Early childhood educators all over the world have embraced this practice. The responsibility of equity and inclusion falls on everyone to help children and families not only succeed but also flourish. With this steadfast commitment from educators, children and families will grow to feel confident about themselves, appreciate the diversity around them, recognize unfairness, and take a stand against prejudice and discrimination.

Reflect

1. How have you increased, or how could you increase, your awareness and understanding of yourself and your social identity?
2. How do you educate yourself about communities different than your own?”
3. How do you feel about advancing social justice? How could you take action?

1.5 INTEGRATING ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION

ABE is more than celebrating different holidays, reading a book about people in wheelchairs, or having dress-up clothes from other countries. ABE is the air that is breathed in and out every day in a classroom. ABE is heard in interactions and language with children, families, coworkers, and other early childhood professionals. ABE is seen in the variety of materials and books that are taught to broaden children's experiences. ABE is felt in warm, loving, and connected environments. It is both child-directed and teacher-directed.

Early childhood programs are built on developmentally appropriate practice. Knowledge of child development, the individual child's interests and abilities, and the context of a child's environment are the foundation of teaching. Children ask questions or role-play different things they see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. These are examples of child-directed activities. When children initiate a type of inquiry, educators use the teachable moments to address and expand their understanding. Educators also introduce new ideas, skills, or materials with which children have limited experience or background. These are educator-directed activities. For ideas to teach ABE content, Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards (2019) recommend starting with these three sources:

- Children's questions, interests, or interactions with each other that educators see as important to respond to and develop.
- Educator-initiated activities based on what educators and families think is important for children to learn.
- Significant events that occur in the children's communities and the larger world that educators believe need to be explored with children.

Classroom Environments

Children's classrooms are places of discovery and curiosity. The materials

and curriculum allow children to explore and should support their development in health and safety, language and communication, cognition and general knowledge, social and emotional development, and approaches to learning.

Representation of diverse people, cultures, and families in pictures, books, and materials is a powerful tool to present ABE as the norm. When families walk in a room that is thoughtfully set up and see themselves, as well as others, reflected in it, the intention is clear and welcoming. Everything in the classroom should build on not only a child's own sense of self but also their sense of belonging.

The concept of "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors," coined by Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), is especially important in early childhood classroom environments. Books, images, and materials should serve as mirrors where children see themselves and their lived experiences reflected; as windows through which they can view lives, cultures, and experiences different from their own; and as sliding glass doors that allow them to enter and engage with these diverse perspectives. When classrooms include these elements, they help foster empathy, identity development, and an appreciation for diversity.

There are many tools that can help early childhood educators assess the classroom environment. *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children & Ourselves* (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020) provides a checklist for assessing the visual material in a classroom environment. Environmental rating scales for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children also provide guidance in diverse resources.

Plastic storage totes with bilingual labels and pictures of contents

Figure 1b: Images showing the bin contents with bilingual labels.

Teaching Framework

An article in *Young Child*, by teachers Lisa Kuh, Debbie Lee Keenan, Heidi Given, and Margaret R. Beneke (2016), built a framework for anti-bias

teaching. This framework, in Table 1b, provides five questions to ask when developing ABE curriculum.

Table 1b

Framework for Anti-Bias Teaching				
Entry Points	**Feeling**	**Thinking**	**Responding**	**Sharing**
What are the children, educators, and families thinking about?	What feelings come up for you?	What might be meaningful to explore with the children?	How do you implement a curriculum that supports learning?	How do you share anti-bias learning by communication process and outcomes?

Consider what you:	Consider how you:	Consider planning:	Consider how you could:	Consider the ways you can share with:
• See in children's play • See in the news • Hear families talking about • Think about yourself • Need to do to listen carefully to children and families • Might document to determine possible entry points	• Feel initially • React initially • Respond based on your personal experiences • Feel about discussing a topic with children or families	• Individually • With your team • With colleagues • By doing more research about a topic • By analyzing and reviewing documentation • Whether an issue feels appropriate to discuss with the programs' children and families	• Respond in the moment • Respond in the long term • Revisit or expand on the issue with children • Make topics accessible to children	• Children • Educators (each other) • Families • Colleagues • The early childhood education field

Early childhood educators who use this framework find many benefits but also feelings of discomfort. Balancing "what they have always done" and adding new ideas and concepts can be a challenge. Prioritizing ABE

activities and extending the topics require more in-depth planning than just doing an art project. Here are common missteps in ABE (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 52):

- **"Tourist Curriculum" Misstep:** Activities or special days set aside to celebrate other cultures that only scratch the surface and are often stereotypical. The view is limited to stereotypes. Examples include celebrating Native American culture by having children make traditional fry bread; making a dreidel for Hanukkah; or having a "Mexico Day" with books, food, and activities—only to go back to the normal day curriculum and ignore people from other cultures the rest of the year.
- **"Token Materials" Misstep:** Adding single teaching materials or images to represent an entire group of people. Examples include one baby with dark skin among many Caucasian babies or one book about a person in a wheelchair that stays on the shelf all year and is never read.
- **"Misinformation/Misrepresenting" Misstep:** Using examples from one group's country of origin to show about their life in the United States or focusing on a historic or stereotypical ritual dress or way of life. Examples include showing images about life in Vietnam to teach about Vietnamese Americans, or teaching all Native Americans/ Indigenous people lived in teepees.

All these ideas come from good intentions, but they can also be considered microaggressions. A microaggression is a subtle, sometimes unintentional statement, action, or incident that expresses prejudice and/ or bias (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020, p. 204). By being mindful of our words and actions, we can create more inclusive and equitable environments.

Cultural Humility

No one person will ever have the "right" answer at any time when it comes to culturally relevant teaching. Cultural humility is an other-

oriented view and is described as a human trait. It lacks the idea of concentrating solely on the knowledge of another person's cultural background and instead proposes openness and humility when engaging with someone from a different cultural background than themselves (Haynew-Mendez & Engelsmeier, 2020, pp. 24–26). Cultural humility understands that no one is a master of any one culture because of the intersectionality of people's various identities. Educators can cultivate a growth mindset to cultural humility and adjust the approach to teaching diverse children.

1.6 CONCLUSION

Anti-bias education is, at the heart, about belonging. It is a lifelong process of learning, trial and error, missteps, and celebrations. Early childhood educators have a unique role in helping to shape society where all children and families are accepted and are able to thrive regardless of differences. There are many challenges to overcome when considering ABE, but educators across the world are implementing this practice to promote equity and opportunity and starting with the youngest learners. Continue to learn, grow, change, and support all children in your care to feel supported and loved. You are not alone. You belong.

Additional Resource

- Review this document: Head Start Multicultural Principles PDF

1.7 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=5#h5p-1

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=5#h5p-2

1.8 REFERENCES

Administration for Children and Families. (2024). *Staff diversity matters*. U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders/staff-diversity-matters

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives, 6*(3), ix–xi. https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf

Blad, E. (2021). *Biden team to revisit how schools should ensure racial equity in discipline.* Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/

biden-team-to-revisit-how-schools-should-ensure-racial-equity-in-discipline/2021/06

Derman-Sparks, L., & Olsen Edwards, J. (2019). Understanding anti-bias education: bringing the four core goals to every facet of your curriculum. *Young Children, 74*(5), 6-13.

Derman-Sparks, L., Olsen Edwards, J., & Goins, C. M. (2020). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves* (2nd ed.). NAEYC Books.

Early Care & Learning Council. (2024). *Diversity, equity, inclusion, & belonging (DEIB)*. Earlycareandlearning.org. https://earlycareandlearning.org/our-programs/diversity-equity-inclusion-belonging-deib/

Frost, R. L., & Goldberg, A. E. (2019). The ABCs of diversity and inclusion: Developing an inclusive environment for diverse families in early childhood education. *ZERO TO THREE Journal*, *39*(3), 36–41.

Haynes-Mendez, K., & Engelsmeier, J. (2020). Cultivating cultural humility in education. *Childhood Education: Innovations*, *96*(3), 22–29.

Kelly, D. J., Quinn, P. C., Slater, A. M., Lee, K., Gibson, A., Smith, M., Ge, L., & Pascalis, O. (2005). Three-month-olds, but not newborns, prefer own-race faces. *Developmental Science*, *8*(6), F31–F36. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2005.0434a.x

Kreider, R. M., & Lofquist, D. A. (2014). *Adopted children and stepchildren: 2010*. U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2014/demo/p20-572.html

Kuh, L. P., LeeKeenan, D. L., Given, H., & Beneke, M. R. (2016). Moving beyond anti-bias activities: Supporting the development of anti-bias practices. *Young Children,* 71, 58–65.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019a). *Advancing equity in early childhood education position statement*. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019b). *Definitions of key terms*. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity/definitions

Office for Civil Rights, US Department of Education. (2021). *Discipline*

practices in preschool [PDF]. Civil Rights Data Collection. https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/crdc-DOE-Discipline-Practices-in-Preschool-part1.pdf

Schneider, A., & Gibbs, H. (2023). *Data dashboard: An overview of child care and early learning in the United States*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/data-dashboard-an-overview-of-child-care-and-early-learning-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20an%20estimated%2097%20percent,share%20of%20the%20general%20population.&text=In%20particular%2C%20non%2DHispanic%20Black,16.4%20percent%20of%20the%20workforce

Shah, H. S. (2023). *Implicit bias*. StatPearls [Internet]. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK589697/#:~:text=Implicit%20bias%20includes%20the%20subconscious,%2C%20affect%20their%20decision%2Dmaking

Slaten, C. D., Ferguson, J. K., Allen, K. A., Brodrick, D. V., & Waters, L. (2016). School belonging: A review of the history, current trends, and future directions. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, *33*(1), 1–15.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

Wilson, D. M., & Bouton, L. J. A. (2024). *LGBT parenting in the United States*. UCLA: Williams Institute. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-parenting-us/

Images:

Figure 1a: “DEIB chart” by Nic Ashman, Chippewa Valley Technical College is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Figure 1b: “IMG_4303.jpg” by Cinthya Quintana-Marofske https://artofprek.com/ is used with permission.

Videos:

Road Less Marveled. (2015, February 8). *May 1, 1969: Fred Rogers testifies before senate subcommittee on communications* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKy7ljRr0AA

Chapter 2: Tracing the Roots and Shaping the Future: The History and Trends of Early Childhood Education

VICKI TANCK, MSED

Course Competency: *Investigate the history and current trends of early childhood education*

Learning Objectives:

- Describe the origins of early childhood education
- Describe current trends that impact early childhood education
- Describe legislative acts that affect early childhood education

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The field of early childhood education (ECE) is rooted in a long and rich history, with some of today's educational philosophies tracing their origins back to ancient Greece. Understanding the historical foundations of ECE provides valuable insight into the theories and practices that continue to shape the field today. This chapter will examine influential

philosophers, key theorists, and significant legislative acts that have helped define current beliefs, practices, and emerging trends in ECE.

2.2 ORIGINS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

For many early childhood educators today, it can be difficult to imagine a time when children were not seen as valuable, capable individuals with unique needs and rights. Over time, our understanding of childhood has beautifully evolved. We've moved from viewing children as primarily obedient and useful to recognizing them as inherently curious, playful individuals who thrive with nurturing and support. Common sayings like "children should be seen and not heard" reflected a broader belief that children's voices and emotions held little value. Childhood itself was not viewed as a distinct or important stage of development; instead, children were seen as miniature adults expected to contribute to the household through labor rather than learning. Harsh discipline, as seen in the saying "spare the rod, spoil the child," was widely accepted as necessary, even for behaviors we now understand to be typical and developmentally appropriate. Although our understanding of early childhood has advanced significantly—thanks to decades of research on brain development, social-emotional growth, and the lifelong impact of early experiences—many people today are still unaware of just how critical the early years are. This makes the role of early childhood educators not only one of caring and teaching, but also of advocacy and public education.

Blending the Present and the Past

Unlike today, attending school was not a universal experience; it was often a privilege reserved for children of specific social classes, statuses, or

racial backgrounds. In contrast to today's play-based learning, education historically centered on religious teachings, often delivered by adults without formal teacher training. Most child-rearing guidance and societal beliefs about children were based on strict morals and values of church teachings. These beliefs remained relatively unchanged until the 1400–1600s. However, during the Renaissance, new ideas emerged, and children began to be seen as innocent and good. People began to think differently and started questioning how children were treated. They observed that there was more to children than society believed. These early advocates worked to change society's views and improve how children grew and developed. Unfortunately, many of them were punished or rejected for speaking out against the beliefs of the time (Social Sci LibreTexts, n.d.).

Today, ECE recognizes multiple domains of development—cognition and general knowledge, social-emotional, health and physical, language and communication, and approaches to learning—that work together to shape a child's learning experience. These domains align closely with the way Dr. David Elkind categorized the key influencers of ECE into philosophers, practitioners, and theorists/researchers (Elkind, 2012).

As you read about philosophers, such as Rousseau and Locke, you will notice they focused on the "What" of experience—what knowledge is important for children to learn. Today, this perspective is reflected in discussions about developmentally appropriate curriculum content and the role of play in early learning (Elkind, 2012).

The practitioners, including Froebel and Montessori, emphasized the "How" of experience—how children engage in learning through hands-on exploration and structured environments. This aligns with our current understanding of active learning, guided discovery, and play-based approaches that support multiple domains of development (Elkind, 2012).

Theorists and researchers, like Piaget and Vygotsky, studied the "Why" of experience—why children develop and learn the way they do. Their work laid the foundation for modern developmental science, which informs how educators support cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic

growth based on stages of development and the role of social interaction (Elkind, 2012).

By integrating these perspectives, today's ECE profession continues to be a holistic field that values what children learn, how children learn, and why their developmental journey unfolds as it does (Elkind, 2012).

Philosophical Foundations

The "What" of experience refers to the content or subject matter that is involved in the learning process—the specific knowledge, ideas, or experiences that children are exposed to and interact with as they learn. Philosophers who are concerned with the "What" focus on understanding and defining what kinds of experiences or knowledge are important or valuable in education. They explore the essence of what should be learned, such as the nature of reality, truth, and the kinds of experiences that shape human development (OpenAI, 2024).

Table 2a explains the basic ideas of some of the early philosophers in the field of early childhood education and how they influence the field today.

Table 2a

The Philosophers	
 *Figure 2a: Martin Luther.* **Martin Luther (1483–1546)** German religious leader who helped start the Protestant Reformation. While he was not an early childhood educator, his ideas influenced education, including for young children.	• **Education for Everyone:** Believed all children, both boys and girls, should go to school, not just the wealthy. • **Parents as Teachers:** Parents should help teach their children at home, especially reading and religion. • **Reading and Writing:** He translated the Bible into German so more people could read it. This encouraged literacy and the importance of learning to read from a young age. • **Schools for All:** Pushed for schools to be available to everyone, which helped lead to ideas about organized early education. • **Moral Learning:** Education should also teach children good values and character. • **Importance to ECE Today:** Luther helped shape the belief that all children should have access to learning from an early age (Lumen Learning, n.d.).



Figure 2b: John Amos Comenius.

John Amos Comenius (1592–1670)

A Czech educator/ philosopher. His ideas on early childhood learning greatly influenced education practices. He created the first children's picture book called *Orbis Pictus (Visible World in Pictures)*.

- **Learning Should Be Enjoyable:** Education should be engaging and not feel like a burden. He encouraged using pictures, hands-on activities, and real-life experiences to help children understand concepts.
- **Teaching in a Child's Native Language:** At a time when Latin was used in schools, he argued that children learn best in their first language, making learning more natural and effective.
- **Education for All:** All children, including girls and the poor, deserved an education, which was a radical idea at the time.
- **Early Learning is Important:** Emphasized that learning should start early in life, as childhood is a key time for brain development.
- **Step-by-Step Learning:** Introduced the idea that children should learn in stages, starting with simple concepts before moving to more complex ones, laying the foundation for modern grade levels.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Comenius' ideas helped shape early education by promoting interactive learning, education for everyone, and a structured approach to teaching. Many of his principles are still used in schools today (Lumen Learning, n.d.).



Figure 2c: John Locke.

John Locke (1632–1704)

English philosopher who made important contributions to education, especially in how we think about the early years of a child's life. Locke's ideas focused on the importance of a child's environment in their development and learning.

- **The Blank Slate (Tabula Rasa):** Children are born without any ideas or knowledge. They learn everything through experience, and what they are taught shapes their understanding of the world. This idea suggests that education has a big impact on a child's future.
- **Importance of Early Learning:** Locke thought that the early years were crucial for shaping a child's character and knowledge. He believed that children should be taught good habits, manners, and self-discipline from a young age.
- **Learning Through Experience:** Children learn best through practical experience rather than just listening to lectures or memorizing information. He emphasized the importance of hands-on activities to help children understand concepts.
- **Encouraging Curiosity:** Children should be encouraged to ask questions and explore the world around them. Teachers should support children's natural curiosity and help them develop a love for learning.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Locke's ideas influenced later educational thinkers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, who also focused on the importance of early childhood education and the role of experiences in shaping a child's development. Today, Locke's belief in the importance of the environment and experience in a child's learning still shapes how we approach early

	childhood education (Lumen Learning, n.d.).

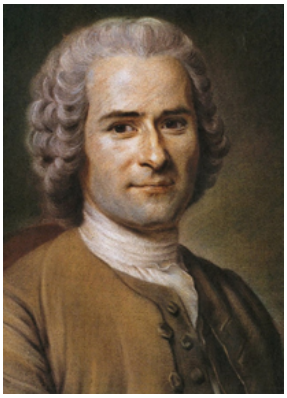


Figure 2d: Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)

Philosopher who believed that children are inherently good and should be allowed to develop naturally. He emphasized the importance of education that supports the child's interests and developmental stages rather than imposing adult expectations too early.

- **Children's Natural Growth:** Children should be allowed to grow and learn naturally, without too much pressure from adults. He thought childhood was special, and children should be free to explore and learn at their own pace.
- **Learning Through Experience:** Instead of being told what to learn by teachers, children should learn by doing and experiencing things. Teachers should guide them, but not just lecture them all the time. Learning should be hands-on and fun.
- **Freedom and Independence:** Children should have the freedom to make their own choices in learning. This helps them become independent and responsible. He also believed it was important for kids to express their feelings and interests.
- **Moral and Emotional Growth:** Teaching children to be kind and responsible is just as important as teaching them facts. He thought that education should help children grow emotionally and learn how to treat others well.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Rousseau's ideas were new and different for his time. Later educators like Friedrich Froebel and Maria Montessori built on his ideas. Today, his belief that children should learn through their own experiences and at their own pace still influences how schools teach young children (Lumen Learning, n.d.).

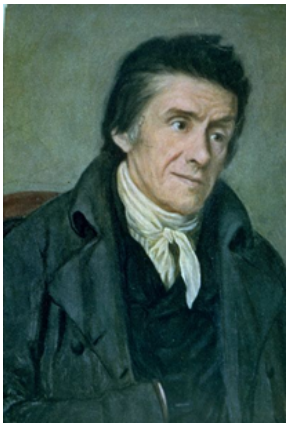


Figure 2e: Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827)

Swiss educator who believed teaching should focus on the whole child, not just their academic skills—an education of the head, the heart, and the hands.

- **Child-Centered Learning:** Teaching should be based on the child's needs and abilities. Teachers should pay attention to each child's individual strengths and challenges.
- **Learning Through Experience:** Proposed that children learn best when they are actively involved in what they are learning. Instead of just listening to lessons, children should explore, experiment, and learn from what they do.
- **Educating the Whole Child:** Education should not only teach subjects like math or reading but also focus on helping children grow emotionally, socially, and physically.
- **The Role of the Teacher:** Teachers were caring guides who support and encourage children. He envisioned teachers creating a positive and loving environment where children feel safe and motivated to learn.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Pestalozzi's ideas influenced many educators, including Friedrich Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, as well as Maria Montessori and the educational method that bears her name. Today, his focus on learning through experience and supporting the child as a whole continues to be an important part of early childhood education (Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi Society, n.d.).

Reflect

Identify a teaching method or practice in modern ECE that reflects one of these philosophers' teaching philosophies.

Educational Foundations

The "How" of experience refers to the process or methods by which learning takes place—the ways in which children acquire knowledge and skills through their interactions with the world. Practitioners (e.g. educators), are focused on the "How" because they are concerned with the practical aspects of teaching and learning. This involves understanding the strategies, activities, and techniques that facilitate learning, such as play, exploration, hands-on experiences, and other pedagogical approaches that help children engage with and make sense of the content (the "What").

In summary, the "How" of experience emphasizes the mechanisms and processes involved in how children learn, including the instructional methods and learning environments practitioners create to support children's development (OpenAI, 2024).

Table 2b explains the basic ideas of some practitioners in the field of ECE and how their work influences current practices.

Table 2b

The Practitioners

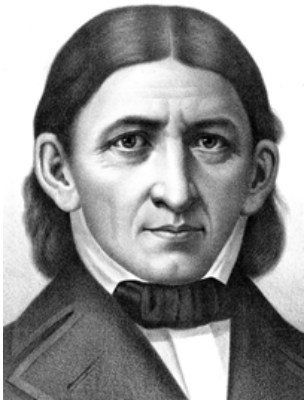


Figure 2f: Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel.

Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782–1852)

Froebel is often regarded as one of the key pioneers in early childhood education, particularly for his innovative ideas about learning through play. His work has significantly influenced how educators understand and support the growth of young children.

View the Froebel's Kindergarten: The Origins of Early Childhood Education YouTube video to learn more.

- **Creator of Kindergarten:** Froebel is best known for creating the concept of the kindergarten—a term that means "children's garden."
- **Active Learning:** Young children learn best when they are engaged in activities that spark curiosity and creativity, rather than through strict lectures or rote memorization.
- **Play as a Foundation for Learning:** Play is the most natural way for children to learn. He argued that through play, children develop essential skills like problem-solving, social interaction, and creativity. This active, playful exploration helps them make sense of the world around them.
- **Hands-On Activities:** Introduced unique educational materials known as "gifts" and "occupations." These tools were designed to be manipulated and explored, allowing children to learn abstract ideas through tangible, hands-on experiences. This method encourages learning by doing, or experiential learning, which can lead to a deeper understanding of concepts.
- **Emphasis on Creativity and Imagination:** Strong focus on nurturing a child's creative spirit. He believed that encouraging imagination and self-expression was crucial for personal development and lifelong learning. His methods invite children to explore their own ideas and express themselves in unique ways.
- **Child-Centered Approach:** Education should be tailored to the individual needs of each child. Instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all curriculum, he argued that teachers should create a supportive environment that allows children to develop at their own pace, guided by

	their interests and natural curiosity. • **Importance to ECE Today:** Froebel's revolutionary ideas laid the groundwork for many modern educational practices. His focus on play, hands-on learning, and a child-centered approach continues to influence early childhood education around the world, ensuring that young learners receive a nurturing and enriching start in life (Froebel Trust, n.d.).



Figure 2g: Horace Mann.

Horace Mann (1796–1859)

Horace Mann is often regarded as one of the key pioneers in the development of American public education. Although his work mostly focused on establishing common schools, his ideas also helped shape early childhood education by emphasizing that every child deserves a good start in life.

- **Education as a Universal Right:** All children should have access to quality education, no matter their background. This idea helped promote the early learning experiences that build a strong foundation for later schooling.
- **Support for Common Schools:** Championed the creation of publicly funded schools that were open to every child. These common schools laid the groundwork for a system where early education became available to all, giving every student a fair chance.
- **Emphasis on Teacher Training:** Stressed the importance of having well-trained teachers and a solid curriculum. This focus ensured that even young learners received thoughtful and effective guidance in their early years.
- **Early Investment in Learning:** While Mann is best known for his work with elementary education, he believed that education should begin at a young age. His reforms encouraged early intervention, helping children develop basic skills and a lifelong love of learning.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Overall, Horace Mann's reforms helped build the public education system and set the stage for quality early childhood education. His vision of equal opportunities and strong teaching continues to influence how young children are taught today (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.).

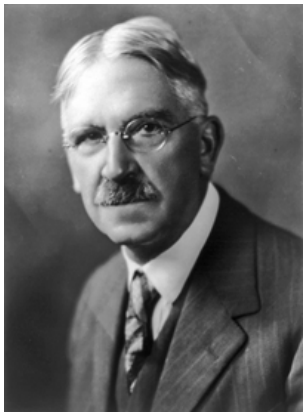


Figure 2h: John Dewey.

John Dewey (1858–1952)

An influential American philosopher and educator who reshaped the way we think about learning. He believed education should be based on real-life experiences, allowing children to learn by doing rather than by memorizing facts.

- **Learning by Doing:** Argued that students learn best when they actively participate in their lessons. This means using experiments, projects, and interactive activities to help children understand ideas.
- **Connecting Education to Life:** Classroom lessons should be connected to real-life situations. This helps students see the relevance of what they learn and encourages critical thinking.
- **Developing Critical Skills:** Methods focused on developing skills like problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, which are important for everyday life.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Dewey's ideas have influenced many modern classrooms, especially in early childhood education. Teachers now create hands-on learning experiences and environments where children explore, ask questions, and learn through play. This approach makes learning more engaging and helps children build a strong foundation for future learning (Kokoros, 2023).

Rachel McMillan (1859–1917) and Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) Rachel and Margaret McMillan were pioneers in early childhood education in Britain. They believed that the first years of life are very important for a child's overall growth—physically, emotionally, and mentally. Visit Alchetron's web page to view images and videos related to work and legacy of these two pioneers.	• **Holistic Approach:** Promoted the idea that early education should care for the whole child. This means focusing not only on academics but also on a child's health, well-being, and social skills. • **Nursery Schools:** Known for setting up some of the first nursery schools. These schools provided safe, clean, and nurturing environments where young children could learn through play, art, and social interaction. • **Improving Child Care:** Improved standards for hygiene, nutrition, and care in early childhood settings. They showed that a healthy and supportive environment helps children learn and grow better. • **Importance to ECE Today:** The ideas of Rachel and Margaret McMillan helped change the way early childhood education is approached. Today, many nursery schools still follow the principle that children learn best when they are happy, healthy, and engaged in playful, hands-on activities. Their work laid the foundation for modern early childhood education practices that focus on the overall development of each child (Brodie, 2024a).



Figure 2i: Rudolf Steiner.

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925)

Philosopher and social reformer, whose ideas led to the development of Waldorf education. He believed early childhood education should nurture the whole child—mind, body, and spirit—by focusing on free play, art, and movement rather than strict academic lessons.

- **Holistic Development:** Focused on physical, emotional, creative, and intellectual growth.
- **Learning Through Play:** Allowed children to develop problem-solving skills and curiosity through free, imaginative play.
- **Artistic and Movement-Based Activities:** Used art, music, storytelling, and movement to enhance learning and foster social skills.
- **Nature and Sensory Experiences:** Encouraged outdoor play and interaction with natural elements to help children form a deep connection with their environment.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Many kindergartens around the world, especially those inspired by Waldorf education, use Steiner's ideas to create playful, child-centered learning environments. Although some critics question the role of spiritual ideas in his approach, Steiner's impact on early childhood education is clear in the widespread adoption of methods that prioritize creativity, holistic growth, and natural learning processes (The Education Hub, 2020).

Patty Smith Hill (1868–1946) American educator who helped shape early childhood education in the United States. She believed that young children learn best through play, exploration, and social interaction rather than strict academic lessons. **Fun Fact:** Hill and her sister Mildred wrote the words to a song called "Good Morning to All." Their original song was meant to be a welcome song to start the day, but the words have since been changed, and the original song is now recognized as the "Happy Birthday" song (Play and Playground Encyclopedia, n.d.). Visit the Smithsonian magazine's web page about Patty and her sister, to see images of Patty and learn more about her life.	• **Child-Centered Learning:** Young children learn best through active exploration rather than passive memorization. She emphasized a child-centered approach where learning is driven by children's natural curiosity and interests. • **Hands-On Play Materials:** Developed Patty Hill blocks, large wooden blocks designed for young children to build, create, and use their imagination. These blocks are still used in early childhood classrooms today to encourage creativity and problem-solving skills. • **Advocacy for Early Childhood Education:** In 1926, Hill co-founded the National Association for Nursery Education, which later became the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Through this organization, she worked to improve the quality of early childhood education and teacher training. • **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** Recognized the importance of well-trained teachers in early childhood education. She helped develop training programs for nursery school teachers to ensure they had the knowledge and skills to support young children's learning and development. • **Importance to ECE Today:** Hill's influence continues today through NAEYC, which remains a leading organization in early childhood education. Many modern early learning programs follow her belief that play-based, hands-on learning increases young children's ability to develop essential skills and a love for learning (Liebovich, 2020).



Figure 2j: Maria Montessori.

Maria Montessori (1870–1952)

Montessori, an Italian physician, is often regarded as one of the key pioneers in early childhood education. Her innovative approach, which focuses on the individual needs and natural curiosity of each child, has changed the way many educators think about teaching young learners.

View the Montessori School Education YouTube video to learn more.

- **Prepared Environment:** Classrooms were carefully arranged with child-sized furniture and specially designed learning materials. Every item in the room was chosen to support independent exploration and learning.
- **Self-Directed Learning:** Children were encouraged to make their own choices about what to study. This freedom helped them become more responsible and confident in their abilities.
- **Hands-On/Sensorial Learning:** Emphasized the importance of using concrete, tactile materials. These hands-on tools allowed children to explore concepts like math, language, and science in a way that made sense to them.
- **Mixed-Age Classrooms:** Classrooms often included children of different ages. This setup gave younger children a chance to learn from older peers while allowing older students to develop leadership and mentoring skills.
- **Role of the Teacher as a Guide:** Instead of directing every activity, Montessori teachers observed and guided children in their learning. They set up the learning environment and offered support when needed, rather than simply giving instructions.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Maria Montessori's approach has had a lasting impact on early childhood education around the world. Her focus on creating an environment where children thrived independently continues to inspire modern educational practices, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn and grow at their own pace (Trillium Montessori,

	2024).



Figure 2k: Lucy Sprague Mitchell.

Lucy Sprague Mitchell (1878–1967)

American educator who helped shape early childhood education. She reinforced the belief that children learn best when they are active, curious, and engaged in hands-on activities.

- **Child-Centered Learning:** Education should nurture the whole child—supporting not only cognitive development but also physical, emotional, and social growth. She encouraged teachers to experiment with different teaching approaches to find the best methods for young learners.
- **Bank Street College:** In 1916 Mitchell established Bank Street College for Teachers with the goal of studying children, creating learning environments that supported their growth, and training educators to maintain those environments. The college became a hub for teacher training and curriculum innovation based on real-world experiences.
- **Experiential Learning and Field Trips:** Emphasized learning through direct experiences, using the surrounding community as a source for education. She promoted field trips, map-making, and exploration to help children understand their school and neighborhood. These hands-on activities helped students connect what they learned in the classroom to their real-world surroundings, reinforcing their knowledge through dramatic play, art, and storytelling.
- **Flexible and Relevant Curriculum:** Instead of rigid, preplanned units of study, Mitchell advocated for teacher-designed curriculums that were meaningful and engaging for children. She challenged traditional memorization-based learning and encouraged dynamic, child-centered approaches to subjects like social studies.

	• **Importance to ECE Today:** Lucy Sprague Mitchell's influence on early childhood education remains strong. Many modern classrooms use experiential, play-based, and inquiry-driven learning inspired by her ideas. Her belief in child-centered, hands-on education continues to shape how educators design engaging and meaningful learning experiences for young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2017).



Figure 2l: Abigail Adams Eliot.

Abigail Adams Eliot (1892–1992)

Eliott was a dedicated educator who played an important role in shaping early childhood education. She believed that young children learn best when they are in caring, playful environments that support their overall growth—emotionally, socially, and academically.

- **Child-Centered Learning:** Young children learn best in environments that support their natural curiosity, health, and development. She emphasized that early education should focus on nurturing the whole child—including social, emotional, and physical well-being—rather than just academic instruction.
- **Innovative Curriculum:** Inspired by Margaret McMillan, Eliot developed nursery school programs that integrated play, exploration, and hands-on learning. She introduced child-sized furniture, colorful classrooms, and natural materials, ensuring that young children had stimulating and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.
- **Teacher Training:** Played a major role in improving early childhood educator training. She founded nursery training schools, including the Eliot-Pearson School at Tufts University and the Nursery Training School at Pacific Oaks College. She also helped establish the National Association for Nursery Education (NANE) in 1926, which later became NAEYC, now one of the most influential early childhood education organizations.
- **Importance to ECE Today:** Abigail Eliot's contributions continue to shape modern early childhood education. Many early learning programs follow her play-based, hands-on approach, and her emphasis on teacher training, family involvement, and child-centered learning remains central to high-quality early childhood education. Her work has left a lasting impact on how young children are taught and supported in

	schools today (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2016).

Loris Malaguzzi (1920–1994) Italian educator who had a huge influence on early childhood education with the Reggio Emilia approach. He believed that children are active, creative learners who express themselves in many ways. Read more about Loris Malaguzzi by visiting the Reggio Children website.	• **Child-Centered Learning:** Children are strong, capable learners who construct their own knowledge. He emphasized children learn best through exploration, questioning, and creative expression, rather than passive listening. His philosophy encouraged educators to respect children's ideas and involve them in shaping their own learning experiences. • **The Environment as a Teacher:** Viewed the learning environment as a "third teacher," where natural materials, open-ended resources, and thoughtfully arranged spaces help guide children's learning experiences. Both indoor and outdoor environments play a key role in supporting children's exploration. • **Multiple Languages of Expression:** Introduced the concept of "The Hundred Languages of Children," emphasizing that children express their thoughts and understanding in many ways—not just through words. He encouraged the use of art, music, movement, storytelling, and hands-on activities to help children communicate their ideas and experiences. • **Collaboration and Community:** Believed that learning is a social process that happens through interactions with peers, teachers, and the wider community. He promoted group projects, discussions, and shared problem-solving to help children learn from one another. Families were also considered important partners in education, reinforcing the connection between school and home. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Malaguzzi's ideas have influenced early childhood education worldwide.

	Many modern programs follow his principles by creating child-centered, play-based, and inquiry-driven classrooms. In Reggio Emilia schools, the classroom is designed to be a beautiful and engaging space that encourages curiosity and creativity. His emphasis on creative expression, collaboration, and an inspiring learning environment has helped shape more dynamic, interactive, and child-focused education practices across the globe (Pound, 2020).

Interdisciplinary Influences

Interdisciplinary influences in ECE refer to how different areas of study, like psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and even the arts, shape our understanding of how young children learn and grow. These different fields help create a well-rounded approach to teaching, recognizing that children develop in many different ways, not just through academics.

The “Why” of experience refers to the reasons or underlying principles that explain why learning happens as a result of experience. Theorists and researchers are focused on the “Why” because they seek to understand the causes, mechanisms, and motivations behind learning. They investigate the psychological, developmental, and cognitive factors that drive how children process experiences and modify their behavior.

In other words, the “Why” is concerned with the scientific explanations and theoretical frameworks that answer questions about the purpose and reasons for learning, such as why certain experiences lead to specific outcomes in children’s development and learning. This involves exploring the deeper rationale behind the learning process and the conditions that make learning possible (OpenAI, 2024).

The following interdisciplinary influences in Table 2c have had a direct

and indirect impact on education. While they developed separately from the philosophers and practitioners, they still play a key role in shaping education and child development. As you look at these influences, think about how their ideas and theories connect to the way we teach and understand children's growth.

Table 2c

Theorists and Researchers (Interdisciplinary Influences)

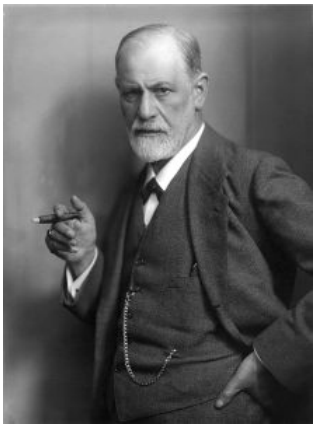


Figure 2m: Sigmund Freud.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Freud's psychosexual theory provides a historical view on how early experiences shape personality and behavior. Though debated, it helps educators understand emotional and behavioral development beyond academics.

- **Psychosexual Stages:** Emphasized the impact of early childhood experiences and unconscious desires on personality development through his psychosexual stages. He believed it was important to resolve conflicts at each stage for healthy psychological growth. Each stage is listed below.
    - **Oral Stage (0–1 year):** Infants explore their world through sucking, biting, and oral exploration. Teachers can observe behaviors like thumb-sucking and mouthing objects to assess a child's need for comfort and security. Providing soothing activities, pacifiers, and safe objects for oral exploration can help infants feel secure and develop trust in their caregivers. Teachers create safe environments knowing children of this age explore with their mouths.
    - **Anal Stage (1–3 years):** Children begin developing control over bodily functions, particularly during toilet training. Educators support independence by offering predictable routines, positive reinforcement, and gentle guidance to help children gain confidence in self-care tasks. Encouraging autonomy through potty training support and self-dressing fosters a sense of achievement and self-control.
    - **Phallic Stage (3–6 years):** At this stage, children become aware of gender differences and personal identity. They may show curiosity about their bodies and relationships. Teachers can promote self-expression and positive discussions about identity by using inclusive language, encouraging dramatic

	play, and reinforcing respectful interactions. ◦ **Latency Stage (6 years–puberty):** Social skills and friendships are a primary focus as children develop teamwork, cooperation, and intellectual interests. Educators can provide collaborative activities, group projects, and structured play to build confidence and encourage positive peer relationships. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Freud's theory helps educators understand children's emotional and psychological development. By recognizing the importance of early experiences, teachers can create nurturing environments that foster security, independence, and healthy social interactions, ensuring a strong foundation for lifelong learning (Brodie, 2024b).



Figure 2n: Arnold Gesell.

Arnold Gesell (1880–1961)

American psychologist and pediatrician whose research on child development has had a lasting influence on ECE. He observed that children grow and develop at their own natural pace and identified predictable milestones in motor skills, language, and social behavior.

- **Understanding Natural Development:** Gesell's studies demonstrated that children develop according to a biological timetable, reaching milestones such as walking, talking, and social interaction at different ages. His research showed that while the environment may influence the timing of development, the sequence remains consistent. This insight encourages teachers to observe and respect each child's individual pace rather than expecting all children to achieve the same skills at the same time.
- **Developmentally Appropriate Practices:** Gesell's work supports the idea that learning activities should align with a child's readiness. His research on maturational-developmental theory helped establish age-related expectations for skills like motor development, language, and social behaviors. Educators can use this knowledge to design lessons and activities that match children's current developmental stages, ensuring that learning happens naturally and effectively.
- **Individualized Learning:** By recognizing that each child's growth is unique, Gesell emphasized the importance of tailoring teaching methods to individual needs. His research led to the idea that a child's developmental age may be different from their chronological age, reinforcing the need for personalized learning experiences. Teachers today apply these principles by adjusting the complexity of activities, providing extra support where needed, and fostering a flexible learning environment.
- **Impact on ECE Today:** Arnold Gesell's research continues to shape modern ECE. His emphasis on

	observing children, understanding their natural growth patterns, and respecting individual differences helps educators create nurturing and effective learning environments. His developmental schedules remain a foundation for assessing children's progress, allowing teachers to provide age-appropriate support and interventions.



Figure 2o: Jean Piaget.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980)

Swiss psychologist whose work on cognitive development has had a major influence on ECE. His theory explains how children actively construct knowledge as they interact with the world.

View the Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development YouTube video to learn more.

- **Cognitive Development:** Developed a theory of cognitive development (stages listed below). He proposed that children construct knowledge through active exploration, emphasizing the role of play and discovery in learning.
- **Early Childhood Stages:** He identified four stages of development, with three key stages affecting early childhood:
    - **Sensorimotor Stage (0–2 years):** Infants learn through senses and movement, developing object permanence (understanding that objects exist even when not seen).
    - **Preoperational Stage (2–7 years):** Young children begin using language and imagination but think in a very concrete and egocentric way. They struggle with logic and perspective-taking.
    - **Concrete Operational Stage (7–11 years):** Children begin to develop logical thinking, understanding concepts like conservation (knowing that the amount of something stays the same even if its shape changes).
- **Impact on ECE Today:** Piaget's theory helped to shift education toward hands-on, child-centered learning. His work encouraged age-appropriate activities that match a child's developmental stage. Teachers now use play-based learning, exploration, and problem-solving to support cognitive growth. His ideas continue to shape early education by emphasizing curiosity, discovery, and active engagement in learning (Simply Psychology, n.d.).



Figure 2p: Lev Vygotsky.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)

Soviet psychologist who developed his sociocultural theory of cognitive development. His work emphasizes that learning is a social process where children develop cognitively through interactions with adults and peers.

View the Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning (5 Key Elements) YouTube video to learn more.

- **Social Interaction:** Believed children learn best in a social context, where they absorb information and develop skills through conversations, play, and shared activities with others. He emphasized that learning is not an isolated process but happens through engagement with more knowledgeable individuals, such as teachers, parents, and peers.
- **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):** Introduced the ZPD to describe the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with support. Teachers use this concept to provide just the right level of assistance, ensuring that children are challenged but not overwhelmed.
- **Scaffolding:** Building on the ZPD, scaffolding is a method where temporary support is given to help a child learn a new skill. As the child becomes more confident and capable, the support is gradually reduced, allowing for independent learning. Teachers use visual aids, prompts, modeling, and guided practice to scaffold a child's learning effectively.
- **Language and Thought:** Highlighted the importance of language in cognitive development, arguing that thought and language are interconnected. He suggested that through dialogue, self-talk, and interactions, children learn to organize their thoughts, solve problems, and understand the world around them. His concept of private speech—when children talk to themselves while learning—was viewed as an essential tool for self-regulation and problem-solving.

	• **Impact on ECE Today:** Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has shaped ECE by guiding teachers in providing appropriate support for children's learning. His idea of scaffolding encourages educators to offer just enough help for children to succeed before gradually withdrawing support. Additionally, his emphasis on social interaction and language has influenced early education by promoting collaborative learning environments where children engage in peer discussions, interactive play, and guided exploration to enhance cognitive growth (Gowrie NSW, n.d.).

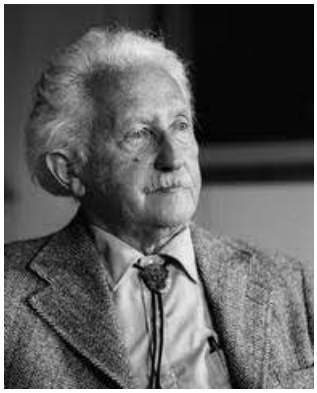


Figure 2q: Erik Erikson.

Erik Erikson (1902–1994)

Psychologist known for his psychosocial development theory, which describes how children grow emotionally and socially through different stages.

View the Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development Explained YouTube video to learn more.

- **Psychosocial Theory:** Proposed the psychosocial theory of development, with eight stages, each defined by a central conflict that shapes identity. He believed successful resolution of these conflicts leads to healthy social and emotional development.
- **Three Key Development Stages in ECE:** Trust vs. mistrust (infants develop security through caring relationships), autonomy vs. shame and doubt (toddlers gain confidence by exploring and making choices), and initiative vs. guilt (preschoolers learn to take initiative through play and decision making).
- **Impact on ECE Today:** Erikson's theory emphasizes the importance of emotional security, independence, and social interaction in learning. Teachers create supportive environments where children feel safe to explore, take risks, and develop confidence. His ideas have influenced classroom practices that encourage cooperative play, emotional regulation, and positive reinforcement, helping children build self-esteem and strong social skills. His work continues to shape ECE by highlighting the role of emotional and social development in learning (Early Years TV, n.d.-b).

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005) Urie Bronfenbrenner was a psychologist known for his ecological systems theory, which explains how a child's development is influenced by different social and environmental factors. View the Ecological Systems Theory YouTube video to learn more.	• **Ecological Systems Theory:** Introduced the ecological systems theory, which explains how a child's development is influenced by multiple layers of their environment, from family and school to broader cultural and societal systems. • **Systems Shaping Growth:** ◦ **Microsystem:** Direct influences like family, teachers, and peers. ◦ **Mesosystem:** Interactions between elements of the microsystem, such as parent–teacher communication. ◦ **Exosystem:** Indirect influences like a parent's workplace or community resources. ◦ **Macrosystem:** Larger cultural and societal influences, including traditions, values, and government policies. ◦ **Chronosystem:** Changes over time, including personal growth and historical events that affect development. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Bronfenbrenner's theory helps educators understand that a child's learning is shaped by more than just the classroom. Teachers recognize the importance of family involvement, community support, and cultural influences in education. His ideas have influenced policies that promote parent–teacher partnerships, high-quality early learning programs, and better support for children from diverse backgrounds. His work continues to shape how schools and communities create environments that nurture children's overall development (Sticks & Stones Education, n.d.).

Contemporary Influences

Contemporary theories in ECE view learning as a holistic process that goes beyond academics to include social, emotional, and cultural growth. They build upon the foundational ideas of earlier theorists—such as Piaget's emphasis on active learning, Vygotsky's focus on social interaction, and Bronfenbrenner's insights into environmental influences—to address today's challenges. Modern researchers like David Elkind and Dan Siegel stress the importance of developmentally appropriate practices in our fast-paced world, while Bruce Perry highlights how early experiences shape brain development. Scholars such as Sonia Nieto, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Adia Harvey Wingfield have further expanded these ideas by advocating for culturally responsive education that honors diversity. In addition, experts like Alison Gopnik, Marilyn Fleer, and Angeline Lillard demonstrate how play is a powerful tool for learning. Explanations of these perspectives are included in Table 2d.

Table 2d

Contemporary Influences	
David Elkind (born 1931) Psychologist known for his work on child development and the importance of play in early learning. View the David Elkind – Play, Love and Work YouTube video to learn more.	• **Emphasized Hands-On Learning:** Elkind believed young children should not be rushed into academic learning but instead learn best through hands-on experiences and exploration • **Advocated for Play-Based Learning:** Elkind emphasized that play is essential for cognitive, social, and emotional development. • **Criticized Early Academics:** He warned against pushing children into formal learning too soon, which can lead to stress and frustration. • **Influenced Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP):** His ideas support teaching methods that match a child's natural learning pace. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Elkind's work continues to shape ECE by reinforcing the idea that young children learn best through play, creativity, and exploration rather than rigid academic instruction (Early Years TV, n.d.-a).

Sonia Nieto (born 1943) Educator and researcher known for her work in multicultural education and equity in learning. She focuses on how culture, language, and identity affect a child's education, especially for diverse and bilingual learners. Visit Sonia's website to learn more.	• **Advocates for Multicultural Classrooms:** Nieto promotes inclusive teaching that respects and celebrates different cultures. • **Supports Bilingual Education:** She emphasizes the importance of valuing children's home languages while helping them learn English. • **Encourages Equity in Learning:** Her work helps teachers recognize and reduce biases to ensure all children receive high-quality education. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Nieto's ideas have shaped ECE by encouraging diverse, inclusive, and equitable teaching practices that support all learners (OpenAI, 2025).
Gloria Ladson-Billings (born 1947) Educator and researcher known for her work on culturally relevant teaching and equity in education. She focuses on how schools can better support students from diverse backgrounds, especially children of color. View the Gloria Ladson Billings – Successful Teachers of African American Children YouTube video to learn more.	• **Developed Culturally Relevant Teaching:** Ladson-Billings encourages teachers to connect learning to a child's culture, background, and experiences. • **Promotes High Expectations for All Students:** She believes all children can succeed if given the right support and opportunities. • **Advocates for Social Justice in Education:** Her work challenges schools to address inequalities and create inclusive, fair learning environments. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Ladson-Billings' research has helped shape more inclusive, culturally responsive teaching methods that ensure all children feel valued and supported in the classroom (OpenAI, 2025).



Figure 2r: Alison Gopnik.

Alison Gopnik (born 1955)

Psychologist and researcher known for her work on child brain development and learning. She studies how young children think, explore, and learn about the world around them.

View the Alison Gopnik – The Amazing Minds of Very Young Children YouTube video to learn more.

- **Supports Play-Based Learning:** Gopnik's research shows that children learn best through curiosity, exploration, and play rather than strict instruction.
- **Highlights Children's Natural Intelligence:** She argues that young children are like little scientists, constantly testing ideas and learning from their environment.
- **Encourages Supportive Caregiving:** Her work emphasizes the importance of strong relationships between children and caregivers for healthy brain development.
- **Impact on ECE Today:** Gopnik's research has influenced ECE by promoting play, curiosity-driven learning, and nurturing relationships as key parts of a child's development (OpenAI, 2025).

Dr. Bruce Perry (born 1955) Psychiatrist and neuroscientist known for his research on child brain development and the effects of trauma. He studies how early experiences, especially stress and neglect, shape a child's ability to learn and regulate emotions. View the Dr. Bruce Perry's 3 E's YouTube video to learn more.	• **Understanding Trauma's Effects:** Perry's work helps educators recognize how trauma affects brain development and behavior. • **Promotes Relationship-Based Learning:** He emphasizes the importance of stable, caring relationships in helping children feel safe and ready to learn. • **Supports a Calm and Structured Environment:** His research encourages classrooms that provide predictable routines and emotional support to help children manage stress. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Perry's work has influenced ECE by promoting trauma-informed teaching that focuses on creating safe, supportive learning environments for all children (EdImprovement, n.d.).

Dan Siegel (born 1957) Neuroscientist and psychologist known for his work on brain development and emotional regulation in children. He emphasizes how early relationships and experiences shape a child's brain and behavior.  View the Why Do We Lose Control of Our Emotions YouTube video to learn more.	• **Promotes Emotional Intelligence:** Siegel teaches that understanding emotions helps children build self-control and healthy relationships. • **Encourages Mindfulness:** His research supports using techniques like deep breathing and reflection to help children manage stress and focus. • **Supports Secure Attachments:** He highlights the importance of strong teacher–child relationships in promoting learning and emotional well-being. • **Impact on ECE Today:** Siegel's work has influenced early education by encouraging emotional awareness, mindfulness, and supportive teacher–child connections to help children thrive (Ingenious Baby, n.d.).



Figure 2s: Marilyn Fleer.

Marilyn Fleer (born 1960)

Educator and researcher known for her work on play-based learning and cultural-historical theory in ECE. She studies how children's learning is shaped by their social and cultural environments.

View the Conceptual PlayWorld of The Hungry Caterpillar for Preschool Children 3 min YouTube video to learn more.

- **Promotes Play-Based Learning:** Fleer emphasizes that children learn best through guided play and hands-on experiences rather than direct instruction.
- **Focuses on Cultural Influences:** Her research highlights how family, culture, and community shape how young children think and learn.
- **Encourages Active Teaching Methods:** She supports teachers in engaging children in exploration and problem-solving, helping them build confidence and creativity. One such method is conceptual play worlds.
- **Impact on ECE Today:** Fleer's work has influenced early education by promoting play, cultural awareness, and interactive learning to support children's development (OpenAI, 2025).



Figure 2t: Angeline Lillard.

Angeline Lillard (born 1961)

Psychologist known for her research on Montessori education and child development. She studies how different teaching methods affect learning and development in young children.

View The Brainwaves Video Anthology: Angeline Lillard-Montessori Education YouTube video to learn more.

- **Supports Montessori Education:** Lillard's research shows that hands-on, self-directed learning helps children develop independence and problem-solving skills.
- **Highlights the Benefits of Play and Exploration:** She emphasizes that structured, active learning is more effective than passive instruction.
- **Connects Brain Science to Education:** Her work links modern neuroscience to effective teaching practices, showing how early experiences shape brain development.
- **Impact on ECE Today:** Lillard's research has influenced early childhood education by promoting Montessori principles, active learning, and child-centered teaching methods (OpenAI, 2025).

Reflect

Think about the origins of early childhood education.

1. How has ECE evolved over time?
2. Explain why it is important for early childhood educators to know its history.

The Origins of Childcare in the United States

The origins of childcare in the United States can be traced back to the early 19th century, although its development has been influenced by various social, economic, and cultural factors over time. Below you will explore a broad overview of the development of childcare in the United States.

Early Beginnings (Pre-1800s)

- Before the 1800s, childcare was primarily a family responsibility, with extended family members, neighbors, or hired help often providing care when parents worked or needed assistance.
- In rural areas, children were cared for in their homes or on farms, and formal childcare did not exist.

Industrial Revolution (Late 1800s)

- The rise of industrialization in the 19th century led to a significant shift in family life. As more women entered the workforce in factories, there was an increasing need for childcare services for working-class families.
- In the 1850s, early forms of institutionalized childcare began to emerge, especially in urban areas. These were often informal arrangements such as “baby farms,” where women would care for children for a fee. These were often seen as a way to help working

mothers, but they lacked regulation and oversight.

The First “Day Nurseries” (Late 1800s to Early 1900s)

- The late 1800s saw the establishment of the first formal “day nurseries” or “daycare centers,” primarily in cities, to care for children of working mothers, particularly the poor.
- These day nurseries were often run by religious organizations or charitable institutions and provided basic care, food, and shelter for children while their parents worked.
- One notable example was the New York Day Nursery Association, founded in 1854, which provided childcare for children whose parents worked long hours in factories (Social Welfare History Project, 2017).

The Progressive Era and the Rise of Social Reform (Early 1900s)

- During the Progressive Era (1890s–1920s), there was an increased interest in social reform, including the welfare of children. This period saw greater recognition of the importance of early childhood education and the role of childcare in supporting working families.
- The concept of ECE began to emerge alongside childcare, with early childhood programs beginning to focus on both care and education.

Post-World War II and Expansion (1940s–1960s)

- After World War II, as more women entered the workforce during the war, the need for reliable childcare became more apparent. The expansion of childcare centers continued in the 1950s and 1960s, especially with government involvement in supporting working mothers.
- The introduction of federal programs like the Child Care and

Development Block Grant (CCDBG) in the 1960s aimed to make childcare more affordable and accessible, though these services remained primarily aimed at lower-income families.

Modern Era (1970s–Present)

- By the 1970s, the need for high-quality childcare became more widespread as more families relied on two incomes. The rise of dual-income households and single-parent families led to an increase in demand for formal childcare services.
- In 1971 the federal government introduced the Comprehensive Child Development Act, a proposal to provide universal childcare, but it was not passed. However, in the 1980s and beyond, various state and federal policies began to shape and regulate the childcare sector, leading to the creation of standards for quality childcare.
- Today, childcare in the United States is a multifaceted system, with public and private providers offering care for children of various ages. It remains a vital service for working families, though debates around affordability, quality, and access continue to shape the sector.

Through these phases, the role of childcare in the United States has evolved from informal family responsibility to a more formal, structured service with a focus on both care and education (OpenAI, 2024).

Reflect

1. How do you think the shift from family-based childcare to formal early learning centers reflects changes in American society?

2. What lessons from history might help us solve problems like high costs and limited access to quality childcare today?

2.3 CURRENT TRENDS AND THEIR IMPACT

Today's trends in early childhood education are closely connected to the ideas and practices developed throughout history. Many of the methods we use today, like play-based learning, child-centered classrooms, and a focus on social and emotional development, are rooted in the work of early thinkers like Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey. These educators emphasized the importance of understanding how children develop and learn at different stages. Over time, their ideas were built upon by modern researchers and programs, like Head Start, that focus on equity and early intervention. As we look at today's education trends, it is clear that they are influenced by these historical ideas, which have shaped how we approach teaching young children and support their growth in all areas.

Current Trends

Current trends in ECE reflect a growing focus on innovation, equity, and child-centered learning approaches. Some of the most significant trends include the following:

1. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): Educators are increasingly focusing on promoting emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and interpersonal

skills in young children, recognizing that these competencies are foundational to academic success and well-being.

Impact: SEL programs help children develop essential skills foundational to academic success and lifelong well-being like empathy, self-regulation, and cooperation. This trend shifts the focus from traditional academics to a more holistic approach, where emotional and social development is equally important. Educators now integrate activities and curricula that support emotional literacy, creating environments where children feel safe and supported.

Reflect

How do you see children's emotional development supported in early learning classrooms?

2. Trauma-Informed Practices: More early childhood programs are adopting trauma-informed approaches that understand the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and support children through resilience-building strategies. ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood, such as abuse, neglect, or household struggles. These experiences can have lasting effects on a person's health, development, and well-being throughout their life.

Impact: More programs are becoming sensitive to the effects of trauma and adverse experiences on young children. This impacts teacher training, curriculum design, and classroom management, as educators are now equipped to recognize signs of trauma and implement strategies that promote resilience, safety, and healing. It encourages flexible teaching and nurturing environments while considering individual children's emotional states.

Reflect

How can you create a sense of safety and trust in your learning environment?

3. STEM and STEAM Integration: There is a growing emphasis on incorporating science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) into early childhood learning experiences. Hands-on, inquiry-based learning fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills from a young age.

Impact: Introducing STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and STEAM (adding arts) in ECE prepares children for future learning and problem-solving. Hands-on, inquiry-based activities encourage exploration and critical thinking, making learning more engaging and relevant. Teachers adapt lesson plans to include more experimentation, construction, and exploration, often requiring new materials and teaching approaches.

Reflect

Think about incorporating STEM/STEAM programming. What are the pros and cons of introducing this into your learning plans?

4. Technology in Early Childhood: The use of technology in classrooms has expanded, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital tools

and apps for interactive learning, online teaching platforms, and using technology to document children's development are becoming common.

Impact: Integrating technology into early childhood classrooms brings both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, digital tools can enhance learning through interactive apps and virtual experiences. On the other hand, it raises concerns about screen time, requiring careful balance to ensure that technology supports rather than replaces real-world, play-based experiences. Educators must also stay current with technology and digital literacy skills.

Reflect

How do you determine the appropriate amount and type of technology used in your classroom?

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching: There is an increasing awareness of the need for culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy. Programs are integrating diverse books, materials, and activities that reflect children's backgrounds, promoting equity and inclusivity.

Impact: There is a growing emphasis on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in classrooms. Culturally responsive teaching means that educators are adapting their materials, communication, and interactions to reflect the diverse backgrounds of children and their families. This trend impacts curriculum choices, classroom discussions, and the types of books and resources made available. Teachers are becoming more aware of unconscious biases and working to foster inclusive environments where all children feel valued.

Reflect

How do you challenge your own biases and promote inclusivity?

6. Focus on Play-Based Learning: The importance of play as a vehicle for learning is gaining more recognition. Research supports play-based and child-initiated learning approaches as developmentally appropriate for young children.

Impact: The resurgence of play-based learning supports a child-centered approach where exploration and imagination are prioritized over rote learning. This impacts classroom setup, curriculum planning, and assessment practices. Educators must create environments encouraging independent and cooperative play, promoting cognitive, language, and social development through natural interactions and hands-on activities. Play is essential for developing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving.

Reflect

How would you explain the value of play-based learning to families? Other educators?

7. Outdoor and Nature-Based Education: Forest schools, outdoor classrooms, and nature-based education programs are on the rise,

promoting physical activity, connection with nature, and experiential learning opportunities.

Impact: Nature-based education emphasizes the benefits of outdoor play and learning, promoting physical activity, creativity, and a connection with the environment. This shift often requires changes to classroom schedules, incorporating outdoor time as a structured part of the day. Schools may also redesign playgrounds or include natural elements like gardens, mud kitchens, and outdoor classrooms. Research shows that outdoor experiences help reduce stress and support cognitive development, leading to healthier, happier children.

Reflect

What barriers do you experience or anticipate in engaging students in outdoor learning experiences and how will you address these barriers?

8. Family Engagement and Support: Early childhood education programs are increasingly recognizing the role of families in children's learning and development. Schools are working to engage families through home–school partnerships, offering resources to support parents and caregivers.

Impact: The trend toward increased family engagement reshapes the role of teachers, who now serve as partners in supporting children's learning beyond the classroom. Teachers communicate more frequently with families, provide resources, and involve them in educational activities. Programs now offer workshops, home visits, and community resources to support parents in understanding their child's development, creating a more collaborative approach to education.

Reflect

What benefits do you see to engaging families in their children's education?

9. Focus on Equity and Inclusion: There is an increasing focus on ensuring all children, including those with disabilities or diverse backgrounds, have access to high-quality education. Programs are seeking ways to reduce achievement gaps and address systemic inequalities.

Impact: This trend drives a commitment to making ECE accessible to all children, regardless of ability, socioeconomic status, or background. Schools are more actively addressing the needs of children with disabilities, English language learners, and those from marginalized communities. Teachers are incorporating inclusive teaching strategies, using adaptive materials, and creating equitable learning opportunities, while policymakers push for funding and support for underserved populations.

Reflect

What steps have you, or will you, take to address equity in your teaching practices?

10. Holistic Child Development: The shift toward nurturing the "whole

child" through comprehensive approaches that include physical health, nutrition, mental health, and family support systems is gaining traction.

Impact: With a shift toward focusing on the "whole child," education systems are integrating health, nutrition, mental well-being, and family support into their offerings. Schools are developing partnerships with health and social services, offering meal programs, wellness initiatives, and mental health supports. Teachers and administrators recognize that children's development is influenced by multiple factors, so there is more emphasis on coordinating efforts with health care providers and community resources.

Reflect

What community organizations might you partner with to enhance the support systems available to families in your program?

These trends reflect a broader understanding of the complexities of early childhood development and the growing need to adapt to the diverse needs of children in the 21st century. In summary, these trends are leading to more comprehensive, child-centered, and inclusive practices in ECE. They require educators to adapt their teaching methods, engage in ongoing professional development, and collaborate more with families and communities to ensure all children receive high-quality early learning experiences (OpenAI, 2024).

Reflect

How do you think the current trends in ECE, such as social-emotional learning, play-based learning, and equity-focused practices, connect with historical educational ideas, and how might they shape the future of education?

2.4 LEGISLATIVE ACTS

Federal Legislation Supporting Early Learning

Government funding and legislation play a crucial role in supporting early childhood education and care in the United States. Over the years, various programs have been developed to help ensure that all children, particularly those from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to quality care and education. Here's an overview of some key programs and laws that have shaped the landscape of ECE in the United States:

Emergency Nursery School (1930s)

- **Overview:** Established during the Great Depression, the Emergency Nursery School aimed to help children of working mothers by providing childcare and basic education. It was one of the first attempts at formal, government-supported ECE.
- **Impact:** This program laid the foundation for later government involvement in early care and education, especially for children from low-income families.

Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) (1935)

- **Overview:** Part of the Social Security Act, ADC provided financial assistance to children who had a parent who was absent, disabled, or deceased. It helped families who were struggling financially by providing resources for basic care.
- **Impact:** ADC helped support families and children, setting the stage for future policies aimed at assisting low-income families.

Head Start (1965)

- **Overview:** Head Start is a federally funded program designed to provide early education, health services, and family support to low-income children. It serves children from birth to age 5 and focuses on school readiness.
- **Impact:** Head Start has made a significant impact by providing early learning experiences to children in need, helping them succeed academically and socially.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1975; amended in 1990 and 2004)

- **Overview:** IDEA ensures that children with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). It includes Part C for infants and toddlers and Part B for preschool-aged children, ensuring they have access to early intervention services.
- **Impact:** IDEA promotes inclusion by requiring early childhood programs to provide accommodations and individualized support services for children with disabilities.

Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) (1981)

- **Overview:** SSBG provides funding to states for a range of social services, including childcare programs, child protective services, and family support services.

- **Impact:** SSBG has enabled states to provide critical services to children and families, helping to improve access to care and education.

Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) (1990; reauthorized in 2014)

- **Overview:** CCDBG provides funding to states to help low-income families access affordable childcare, ensuring that parents can work or attend school. The 2014 reauthorization emphasized improving childcare quality.
- **Impact:** This program has made childcare more affordable and accessible while improving the safety and quality of care by setting standards for providers.

Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) (1993)

- **Overview:** FMLA allows eligible employees to take unpaid, job-protected leave for family and medical reasons, including the birth and care of a newborn child.
- **Impact:** FMLA supports early childhood development by allowing parents to take time off to bond with their newborns and provide care without the fear of losing their jobs.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (1996)

- **Overview:** TANF replaced ADC and provides temporary financial assistance to low-income families with children. The program focuses on promoting work and self-sufficiency, offering support for basic needs like food, housing, and childcare.
- **Impact:** TANF supports low-income families by providing resources and opportunities to move toward self-sufficiency, while also supporting children's basic needs.

Child Care Access Means Parents in School Act (CCAMPIS) (1998)

- **Overview:** CCAMPIS provides funding for campus-based childcare services for low-income parents who are enrolled in postsecondary education.
- **Impact:** This program helps student parents complete their education by offering affordable childcare, indirectly supporting ECE.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001)

- **Overview:** While primarily focused on K–12 education, NCLB emphasized early literacy initiatives such as Reading First and Early Reading First to improve reading skills in preschool children.
- **Impact:** NCLB highlighted the importance of early literacy and influenced ECE, even though it was criticized for its focus on standardized testing.

Birth to Five Policy Alliance (2005)

- **Overview:** This initiative supports policies that promote the development of infants and toddlers, aiming to integrate services across early care and education programs.
- **Impact:** The alliance advocates for policies that improve access to quality early education, focusing on birth-to-five systems and supporting the early childhood workforce.

Child Nutrition Act (1966; reauthorized in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010)

- **Overview:** This act provides funding for programs like the National School Lunch Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), ensuring that children in early childhood programs have access to nutritious meals.

- **Impact:** The act promotes healthy development by ensuring that children receive nutritious meals, which is essential for their physical health and readiness to learn.

Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT–ELC) (2011)

- **Overview:** The RTT–ELC was a federal grant competition aimed at encouraging states to improve ECE and enhance school readiness.
- **Impact:** This initiative raised the quality of early learning programs, enhanced educator professional development, and improved early learning standards.

Preschool Development Grant Program (2014)

- **Overview:** This grant program supports state efforts to expand and improve preschool programs, particularly in high-need communities.
- **Impact:** The program has helped increase access to preschool, improve educator qualifications, and enhance curriculum and assessments to better prepare children for school.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015)

- **Overview:** ESSA replaced NCLB and gave states more flexibility in implementing education standards. It also provided support for ECE by encouraging states to invest in preschool programs.
- **Impact:** ESSA promoted collaboration between early childhood programs and K–12 education systems, improving early learning opportunities and school readiness.

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) (2021)

- **Overview:** ARPA provided significant funds to support ECE in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including funding for childcare

providers.

- **Impact:** ARPA helped stabilize the childcare industry, supported workforce retention, and provided childcare subsidies to families, ensuring continued access to ECE during the pandemic.

These laws and programs collectively shape the structure, accessibility, and quality of ECE in the United States. By providing financial support, improving childcare quality, ensuring inclusion for children with disabilities, and promoting early learning initiatives, these policies help ensure that more children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to the resources they need for a strong start in life (OpenAI, 2024).

Reflect

1. How do you think government funding and laws, like Head Start and the American Rescue Plan Act, help improve ECE?
2. What might be the long-term effects on children and society if these supports were not available?

State Legislation Supporting Early Learning

Individual states manage early education and care by creating and enforcing policies that ensure young children have access to quality programs. They oversee things like licensing requirements for childcare centers and preschools, making sure that these programs are safe and meet certain standards. States also determine funding for early childhood programs, including how money is distributed for programs like Head Start or childcare assistance for low-income families. Each state can

decide on its own rules for eligibility in programs, meaning they can choose who gets access to certain services. They also make sure teachers and caregivers in early education programs meet certain qualifications, like having specific training or certifications. Overall, states work to ensure that young children receive the education and care they need for healthy development.

In Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) is responsible for licensing and monitoring licenses for childcare and family childcare centers.

According to the DCF website:

> Our department's vision is that all Wisconsin children and youth are safe and loved members of thriving families and communities. To reach our goal, we are focused on reducing racial and ethnic disparities in our programs and services, focusing on five key priorities:
>
> - Systematically increasing access to quality early care and education programs that support the needs of children and families statewide.
> - Putting families in the center of successful child support and good-paying jobs programs.
> - Safely transforming the child welfare and youth justice system to dramatically increase the proportion of children supported in their homes and communities.
> - Dedicating additional resources to support vulnerable and historically underserved youth, specifically teenage girls, kids with complex care needs, and youth transitioning out of the foster care system.
> - Fostering a workplace where agency staff feel engaged, valued, and connected to our vision (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2024).

In Wisconsin, several legislative acts and state-specific programs directly impact ECE. These policies focus on improving the quality of care, promoting access, and ensuring the health, safety, and developmental well-being of young children. Below are key legislative acts and initiatives affecting ECE in Wisconsin:

Wisconsin Birth to 3 Program (Part of IDEA) (1986)

- **Overview:** The Birth to 3 Program, governed by Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), provides early intervention services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities in Wisconsin.
- **Impact:** This program ensures that young children with special needs receive individualized services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and developmental support, from birth to age 3. It supports family-centered approaches and helps children access necessary resources and services to reach developmental milestones.

Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program (Part of the Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) (1996)

- **Overview:** Wisconsin Shares provides financial assistance to low-income families to afford quality childcare, so parents can work or participate in education or training programs.
- **Impact:** This program makes ECE more accessible to working families. It also influences childcare providers by linking subsidies to participation in the YoungStar rating system, encouraging higher standards and professional development among providers.

Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS) (2003)

- **Overview:** While not a legislative act, WMELS is a set of state standards developed to guide early childhood education programs

across Wisconsin. These standards outline developmental expectations for children from birth to age 8 across various domains, including language and communication, cognition and general knowledge, social-emotional, approaches to learning, and health and physical development.
- **Impact:** WMELS serves as a framework for early childhood educators, informing curriculum development and assessment practices across childcare centers, preschools, and Head Start programs. The standards promote developmentally appropriate practices that align with statewide educational goals.

Wisconsin Act 293—Safe Sleep for Infants (2006)

- **Overview:** This law requires childcare providers in Wisconsin to follow safe sleep practices for infants, such as placing babies on their backs to sleep and avoiding loose bedding, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- **Impact:** Act 293 has contributed to reducing sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) in childcare settings by mandating safe sleep practices. It also requires ongoing training for childcare providers on safe sleep guidelines.

Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) (2008)

- **Overview:** Established under Governor Jim Doyle in 2008, ECAC makes policy recommendations to ensure high-quality early care and education in Wisconsin. It focuses on aligning services, improving early childhood workforce conditions, and increasing family engagement.
- **Impact:** ECAC advises on legislative and policy decisions, advocating for the needs of young children and improving the state's early childhood system. It plays a critical role in shaping policies that affect early care and education in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin Act 166—Four-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K) Expansion (2010)

- **Overview:** This law allows school districts to claim state aid for offering 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) programs. The law has significantly expanded access to 4K in Wisconsin, making early education programs available in many public school districts.
- **Impact:** The act supports the expansion of public pre-kindergarten (4K) programs across the state, increasing early learning opportunities for 4-year-olds. Many districts partner with community-based early childhood programs, including childcare centers and Head Start, to offer 4K. This expansion has increased school readiness and promoted early literacy and social-emotional skills among Wisconsin's youngest learners.

YoungStar Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) (2010)

- **Overview:** YoungStar is Wisconsin's childcare quality rating and improvement system, created to assess, improve, and communicate the quality of early childhood programs. It was enacted through the Wisconsin Legislature as part of efforts to increase accountability and promote high-quality care for children (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.).
- **Impact:** The program assigns ratings to licensed childcare providers based on quality indicators such as staff qualifications, curriculum, and family engagement. Providers that achieve higher ratings receive higher reimbursement rates through the Wisconsin Shares childcare subsidy program. This initiative helps parents make informed choices about early care and education, while encouraging continuous improvement among providers.

Wisconsin Act 32—Licensing of Child Care Providers (2011)

- **Overview:** Act 32 imposed stricter regulations for childcare providers,

including new background checks, professional development requirements, and higher health and safety standards. It also introduced changes to how childcare centers are licensed and monitored in the state.
- **Impact:** By improving licensing and regulation of childcare facilities, this law aims to enhance the quality of care provided to young children in Wisconsin. It promotes higher standards of care and safety across all licensed childcare programs, contributing to better outcomes for children.

Wisconsin Act 10—Collective Bargaining and Education Funding (2011)

- **Overview:** Act 10, also known as the "Budget Repair Bill," significantly reduced collective bargaining rights for public employees, including teachers. It also led to changes in education funding.
- **Impact:** While not specifically focused on ECE, Act 10 impacted public school districts and their ability to negotiate salaries and working conditions for teachers. This has had indirect effects on the resources available for ECE programs in public schools, including compensation for 4K teachers.

Wisconsin's Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge (2013)

- **Overview:** Wisconsin participated in the federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, a competitive grant program that aimed to improve early learning and development programs.
- **Impact:** Through this initiative, Wisconsin increased investments in ECE, enhanced the YoungStar rating system, and improved data systems for tracking child outcomes. The grant also supported the alignment of early learning standards with K–12 education and professional development for early childhood educators.

Wisconsin Act 59—Safe Childcare Facilities (2017)

- **Overview:** Act 59 imposed stricter health and safety requirements for childcare centers, including background checks, staff training, and facility inspections. It requires compliance with federal health and safety standards for providers participating in the Wisconsin Shares program.
- **Impact:** This law enhances the safety and quality of childcare facilities by ensuring providers meet health, safety, and staff training requirements. It also aligns Wisconsin with federal childcare health and safety standards, making childcare environments safer for children and more accountable to families.

Wisconsin Act 20—Early Literacy and Kindergarten Entry (2023)

- **Overview:** Act 20 made early literacy screening mandatory for all 4K and 5K students in Wisconsin public schools. The law requires school districts to assess children's literacy skills and intervene early when students are at risk of reading difficulties.
- **Impact:** By mandating early literacy assessments, this law ensures that schools identify children who need additional support in reading before they fall behind. It also emphasizes the importance of early intervention, linking ECE programs with the state's efforts to improve literacy outcomes.

These legislative acts and initiatives in Wisconsin emphasize quality, safety, access, and developmental support in ECE. Programs like WMELS, YoungStar, and Wisconsin Shares ensure that early childhood educators and childcare providers meet high standards, while laws like Act 293 on safe sleep practices and Act 59 on childcare safety create secure and nurturing environments for young children. Additionally, expanding access to 4K programs and providing early intervention services under Birth to 3 helps ensure children in Wisconsin receive the foundation they need for lifelong success (OpenAI, 2024).

Reflect

1. How do you think state policies and funding—like Wisconsin's YoungStar and early learning standards—help create safe, high-quality early education environments?
2. What might happen if these state supports were not available?

2.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the history of ECE has helped shape the approach to educating young children today. Current trends, like focusing on inclusive education, social-emotional learning, and involving families, are changing how early education programs support children's growth. Laws such as IDEA and the Childcare and Development Block Grant have played an important role in making sure that all children, especially those from low-income families, have access to quality education and care. As these trends and laws continue to change, they create a system that recognizes the importance of early learning, making sure every child has the best start in life.

Reflect

Reflect on the key concepts of the chapter and connect them to your understanding of early childhood education and its importance.

1. **Think about the origins of ECE:** How has ECE evolved over time and why is it important early childhood educators know its history?
2. **Consider the current trends in ECE:** Think about the importance of one or two trends. How can they positively impact young learners?
3. **Reflect on the role of legislative acts in ECE:** How have laws like IDEA and the Childcare and Development Block Grant shaped the way children receive care and education today? Why do you think these laws are essential for creating equal opportunities for all children?
4. **Connect to your personal experiences:** Think about your own experiences with ECE, whether as a child, sibling, or in an observational setting. How have these trends and laws affected your experience or the experience of others in early education programs?

2.6 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=33#h5p-3

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=33#h5p-4

2.7 REFERENCES

Brodie, K. (2024a). *McMillan sisters: Pioneers of early years outdoor education*. Early Years TV. https://www.earlyyears.tv/mcmillan-sisters-pioneers-of-early-years-outdoor-education/

Brodie, K. (2024b). *Sigmund Freud in early childhood education: A practical guide*. Early Years TV. https://www.earlyyears.tv/sigmund-freud-in-early-childhood-education-a-practical-guide/

Early Years TV. (n.d.-a). *David Elkind's theories on child development and*

cognition. https://www.earlyyears.tv/david-elkinds-theories-on-child-development-and-cognition/

Early Years TV. (n.d.-b). *Erik Erikson's psychosocial development*. https://www.earlyyears.tv/erik-erikson-psychosocial-development/

EdImprovement. (n.d.). *Intergenerational cycle of trauma*. https://www.edimprovement.org/post/intergenerational-cycle-of-trauma

The Education Hub. (2020). *The Steiner approach*. The Education Hub. https://theeducationhub.org.nz/the-steiner-approach/

Elkind, D. (2012). The many modes of experience and learning: The grandmasters of ECE. *Exchange: The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine Since 1978*, (203), 8–10.

Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Horace Mann*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Horace-Mann

Froebel Trust. (n.d.). *Froebel's principles and practice today*. Froebel Trust. https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Froebels-principles-and-practice-today.pdf

Gowrie NSW. (n.d.). *Lev Vygotsky's theory of child development*. https://www.gowriensw.com.au/thought-leadership/vygotsky-theory

Ingenious Baby. (n.d.). *Interview with Dr. Dan Siegel*. https://ingeniousbaby.com/interview/dr-dan-siegel/

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi Society. (n.d.). *Home*. https://jhpestalozzi.org/

Kerr, G. (2022). *A brief history of childhood*. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003035138-3

Kokoros, T. (2023). *Embracing John Dewey's theories: A path to improving early childhood education practices*. Ideas and Innovations in Early Childhood Education. https://www.earlychildhoodeducationandcare.com/bloggers/2023/3/29/ng8mtx5onwqcvm8i0q6us3jlzz4ukz

Liebovich, B. (2020). *Our proud heritage. NAEYC's first president: Patty Smith Hill*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2020/naeycs-first-president-patty-smith-hill

Lumen Learning. (n.d.). *The early contributors*. In ECHD 250: Children with special needs. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-canton-echd250/chapter/the-early-contributors/

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2016). *Our proud heritage: Abigail Eliot and Margaret McMillan—Bringing the nursery school to the United States*. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2016/our-proud-heritage

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2017). *Our proud heritage: Circle time, free play, and field trips*. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2017/our-proud-heritage-legacies-pioneers

Oliveira, P. (2018). True then, truer now: The enduring contributions of Arnold Gesell. *Young Children, 73*(3), 87–90. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/jul2018/enduring-contributions-arnold-gesell

OpenAI. (2024). *ChatGPT* (Feb 15 version) [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/

OpenAI. (2025). *ChatGPT* (Jan 25 version) [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/

Play and Playground Encyclopedia. (n.d.). *Patty Smith Hill*. https://www.pgpedia.com/h/patty-smith-hill

Pound, L. (2020). *Early years pioneers – Loris Malaguzzi*. Nursery World. https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/features/early-years-pioneers-loris-malaguzzi/

Simply Psychology. (n.d.). *Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development*. https://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html

Social Sci LibreTexts. (n.d.). *1.2: History of early childhood education*. LibreTexts. https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/1.02:_History_of_Early_Childhood_Education

Social Welfare History Project. (2017). *Nursery schools: History (1844–1919)*. Virginia Commonwealth University. https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/nursery-schools-history-1844-1919/

Sticks & Stones Education. (n.d.). *Theorist in the spotlight: Urie Bronfenbrenner and the EYLF*.

https://www.sticksandstoneseducation.com.au/blogs/educators-notebook-the-early-years-edition/theorist-in-the-spotlight-urie-brofenbrenner

Trillium Montessori. (2024). *Montessori education: Beginner's guide*. https://www.trilliummontessori.org/montessori-education/

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (n.d.). YoungStar. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2024). *About us / vision & priorities*. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/about-us

Images:

Figure 2a: "Martin_Luther,_1529" by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2b: "John_Amos_Comenius_portrait" by Karol Miloslav Lehotský (1879–1929) is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2c: "JohnLocke" by Godfrey Kneller (1646–1723) is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2d: "Jean-Jacques_Rousseau_(painted_portrait)" by Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788) is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2e: "Johann_Heinrich_Pestalozzi" by F.G.A. Schöner is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2f: "Frederick-Froebel-Bardeen" by C.W. Bardeen, publisher is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2g: "Horace_Mann_MET_37.14.25" by Southworth & Hawes is licensed under CC0, Public Domain.

Figure 2h: "John_Dewey_cph.3a51565" by Underwood & Underwood is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2i: "Steiner_um_1905" by Otto Rietmann is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2j: "Maria_Montessori_(portrait)" by unknown author is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2k: "LucySprague1900" by unknown author is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2l: "Abigail_Adams_Eliot_(1892–1992)_at_Radcliffe_in_1914" by unknown author is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2m: “Sigmund_Freud,_by_Max_Halberstadt_(cropped)” by Max Halberstadt is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2n: “nlm_nlmuid-101415950-img” by Harris & Ewing is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2o: “Jean_Piaget_in_Ann_Arbor” by unknown author is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2p: “Lev-Semyonovich-Vygotsky-1896-1934” by unknown author is in the Public Domain.

Figure 2q: “Erik_H._Erikson” by Erikson institute is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Figure 2r: “Alison_Gopnik_Photo” by Kathleen King is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

Figure 2s: “Marilyn_Fleer_FASSA_Screenshot_2021-11-11_at_06.00.44” by Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia is licensed under CC BY 3.0

Figure 2t: “Angeline_S_Lillard” by UVA-CDL is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Videos:

Collign Testing and Pyschology Services. (2019, May 24). *Erik Erikson’s theory of psychological development explained* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XxFmXkD8M8

Fleer, M. (2023, October 29). *Conceptual playworld of The Hungry Caterpillar for preschool children 3 min* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lIwjgFlYL1g

Helpful Professor Explains!. (2023, November 26). *Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning (5 key elements)* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPKV2f7uDAo

Jewish Family Service: Adoption and Foster Care. (2021, January 20). *Dr. Bruce Perry’s 3 E’s* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jOPhiWHPpk

Kids Want to Know. (2017, March 12). *Why do we lose control of our emotions?* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bKuoH8CkFc

Odyssey Institute. (2020, October 6). *Ecological systems theory* [Video].

YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRdlWPB8xS4

Sprouts. (2016, June 14). *Montessori school education* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzmvtVAuuyI

Sprouts. (2018, August 1). *Piaget's theory of cognitive development* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhcgYgx7aAA&t=223s

Sprouts. (2021, May 31). *Froebel's kindergarten: The origins of early childhood education* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lieFOzjLHM8

The Brainwaves Video Anthology. (2015, October 23). *Gloria Ladson-Billings – Successful teachers of African American children* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmAZjNRmaII

The Brainwaves Video Anthology. (2016, January 12). *David Elkind – Play, love and work* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOWbh8qqTGU

The Brainwaves Video Anthology. (2017, November 8) Angeline Lillard – Montessori Education [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com.watch?v=zbmw410zf50

The Brainwaves Video Anthology. (2019, March 17). *Alison Gopnik – The amazing minds of very young children* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCB_BcyWgBk

Chapter 3: Exploring Early Childhood Education Settings: A Guide to Diverse Learning Environments

NORA ZIBURSKI, EDD

Course Competency: *Summarize types of early childhood education settings*

Learning Objectives:

- Differentiate between the variety of early childhood education settings
- Differentiate among the unique programming for each stage of development (infant, toddler, preschool, school age)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The type of early childhood education (ECE) setting a child attends plays a crucial role in shaping their development. These settings can range from home-based environments to formal educational institutions, each with its own unique approach to fostering development. This chapter will focus on differentiating between the various types of ECE settings and understanding how each program is designed to address the specific

needs of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children. Examining the distinctive features of each stage helps form a deeper understanding of how developmental milestones guide program design and educational practices in ECE.

3.2 SETTINGS

Early childhood education settings encompass a variety of environments designed to provide care, learning experiences, and support for young children. These settings can range from home-based programs, such as family childcares, to center-based programs like preschools and childcare centers. Preschools often focus on preparing children for kindergarten by introducing basic academic skills and social-emotional development. Childcare centers sometimes provide a broader range of services, including full-time care for infants and toddlers. Additionally, there are specialized programs for children, such as Head Start, which offers comprehensive services for low-income families, and Montessori schools, which emphasize independent learning and exploration (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.-a; Gordon & Browne, 2017).

Scenario: *Choosing the Perfect Early Childhood Program*

The Lee family is expecting their first child and is starting to research early childhood education options. They are overwhelmed by the variety of choices available, from traditional preschools to Montessori schools and home-based childcare.

Peg, the mother, is drawn to the idea of a Montessori school because she appreciates its emphasis on independent learning and exploration. However, her husband, Dave, is concerned about the cost and the potential for long waitlists. They also wonder if a smaller, home-based setting might be a better fit for their newborn.

The Lees decide to visit several different early childhood programs to get a better sense of their options. They tour a local childcare center, a Montessori school, and a family childcare home. At each setting, they observe the interactions between children and teachers, assess the quality of the facilities, and ask questions about the program's philosophy, curriculum, and costs.

After careful consideration, the Lees decide that a family childcare home is the best option for their family. They find a caregiver who is experienced, caring, and has a good reputation in their community. They believe that a smaller, more intimate setting will provide a nurturing environment for their newborn and allow for more personalized attention.

(Google AI Gemini, 2024)

Factors That Determine the Type of Early Childhood Program

The type of early childhood program is influenced by several factors, including the following:

- **Age Group:** Programs are often tailored to specific age groups, such as infants, toddlers, or preschoolers.
- **Philosophy:** The program's underlying philosophy, such as

Montessori, Reggio Emilia, or traditional, can shape its curriculum and approach.
- **Curriculum:** The specific educational content and activities offered can vary widely.
- **Licensing Requirements:** Government regulations and licensing standards can influence the program's structure and operations.
- **Funding:** The source of funding, whether public, private, or a combination, can affect the program's resources and accessibility.
- **Location:** The program's location, whether in a home, a school, or a community center, can impact its size and amenities.
- **Staff Qualifications:** The education and experience of the program's staff can influence the quality of care provided.
- **Family Preferences:** Parents' preferences for their child's care, such as specific teaching methods or language immersion, can also play a role.
- **Special Needs:** Programs that cater to children with special needs may have different requirements and accommodations.

These factors can interact in various ways to create a diverse range of early childhood programs that meet the needs of children and families (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.-b; Gordon & Browne, 2017; Workman & Ullrich, 2024).

Types of Early Childhood Education and Childcare Settings

Early childhood education and childcare settings offer a variety of options to cater to families' needs and preferences. The following subsections describe each type.

Home-Based Settings

- **Family Childcare Homes:** These are operated by individuals in their

own homes, typically caring for a small group of children. They provide a familiar and intimate setting. These are regulated or licensed providers.

- **Au Pairs:** This arrangement involves a live-in caregiver who provides childcare and companionship for children in exchange for room and board.
- **Nannies:** Nannies are hired caregivers who typically provide full- or part-time care in the child's home. They may offer individualized attention, help with routines, and support learning and development.
- **Friend, Family, and Neighbor (FFN) Care:** This informal care is provided by someone the family knows and trusts, such as a relative, friend, or neighbor. It is often flexible and culturally familiar, and may not be licensed or regulated.



Figure 3a: Family childcare provider with a small group of children.

Group-Based Settings

- **Preschools:** Primarily focused on preparing children for kindergarten, preschools offer structured learning experiences, often with a curriculum centered around play and exploration.
- **Childcare Centers:** These facilities provide full-time or part-time care for children of various ages, from infants to school-age children. They often offer a wide range of activities and services.
- **Head Start:** A federally funded program that provides comprehensive services for low-income families, including ECE, health screenings,

and family support.

- **Montessori Schools:** These schools follow the Montessori method, which emphasizes independent learning, exploration, and hands-on activities.
- **Reggio Emilia Schools:** A program with a child-centered approach to ECE that emphasizes creativity, collaboration, and documentation.
- **Nature-Based Preschools:** Early childhood education programs that emphasize learning outdoors and connecting with nature. These programs often incorporate natural elements into their curriculum and learning spaces, such as outdoor classrooms, natural materials, hands-on exploration, and a focus on sustainability.



Figure 3b: Child at a nature preschool.

Specialized Settings

- **Infant and Toddler Care Centers:** Designed specifically for infants and toddlers, these centers provide specialized care and support for young children.
- **Early Intervention Programs:** For children with developmental delays or differing abilities, these programs offer individualized services to help them reach their full potential.
- **Before and After School Programs:** These programs provide care and supervision for children before and after school hours.
- **Universal Preschool:** A system where all children, regardless of family income or background, have access to high-quality preschool education. Often located in public schools through 3K, 4K, and 5K programming.
- **Laboratory Schools:** Laboratory schools are educational institutions that serve as experimental or demonstration sites for new teaching methods, curriculum, or educational philosophies. These schools are typically affiliated with universities or research institutions, allowing for close collaboration between educators and researchers.
- **Employer Sponsored:** Employer-sponsored ECE programs are childcare programs offered or subsidized by employers for their employees.
- **Faith-Based Programs:** Faith-based ECE programs are programs that incorporate religious or spiritual beliefs into their curriculum and practices. These programs often aim to instill moral values, promote spiritual development, and provide a nurturing environment that reflects the values of a particular faith tradition.
- **Co-Op Preschools:** Parent-cooperative preschools involve parents actively participating in the program, often sharing responsibilities like teaching and classroom management.

The best setting for a child depends on various factors, including their age, individual needs, family preferences, and budget. Early childhood

professionals should be aware of the various aspects of each program and how it aligns with their own philosophy and career goals.

Table 3a

Types of Programs			
Program	**Definition**	**Benefits**	**Challenges**
Universal Preschool	A system where all children, regardless of family income or background, have access to high-quality preschool education	Improved school readiness, reduced achievement gaps, and positive economic outcomes	• Requires significant funding and infrastructure development • May not follow developmentally appropriate practices and focus too heavily on academics (Schoof & Koenig, 2022)
Head Start	A federally funded program that provides comprehensive ECE, health, nutrition, and family support services to low-income children and their families	Helps children develop the skills needed for school success and improves family well-being	• Limited funding and availability in some areas (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.-a, n.d.-b) • Poor health outcomes for Head Start teachers compared to other ECE professionals

Private Preschools	Preschools operated by individuals or organizations	A wide range of options to meet different family needs and preferences	• Can be expensive and may not be accessible to all families
Montessori Schools	Preschools that follow the Montessori educational philosophy, emphasizing independent learning, exploration, and hands-on activities (Maria Montessori Training Organization, 2024)	Promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and social skills	• May require higher tuition fees and may not be available in all areas
Reggio Emilia Schools	A child-centered approach to ECE that emphasizes creativity, collaboration, and documentation (Reggio Emilia Approach, 2022)	Fosters children's curiosity, imagination, and communication skills	• Requires highly trained staff and may be more resource-intensive • True Reggio Emilia schools may not be possible in our U.S. society (Haigh, 2009)

Nature-Based Preschools	Preschools that emphasize learning outdoors and connecting with nature	Improves physical health, cognitive development, and social-emotional skills	• May require specialized training for staff and may be limited by equal access to gear (North American Association for Environmental Education, 2023)
Family Childcare Homes	Small-scale childcare programs operated in private homes	Provides a home-like environment and individualized attention	• May have limited resources and may not offer the same level of educational programming as center-based programs (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.-c)

Types of Early Childhood Programs

Head Start

Head Start was launched in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. The primary goal was to provide comprehensive ECE, health, and nutrition services to low-income children and their families. Initially, Head Start focused on preparing children for school and

addressing the social and economic disadvantages faced by many families. Over the years, the program has expanded to include a wider range of services, such as parent education, health screenings, and mental health support. Head Start has been instrumental in improving the lives of millions of children and families, and it continues to be a vital component of ECE in the United States.

Head Start programs are considered high-quality early childhood programs for children ages 3–5 due to several key factors. They prioritize child development by providing comprehensive services that address children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical needs. Head Start programs typically employ qualified early childhood educators who are trained to implement effective curriculum and support children's learning (Whitaker, 2013). Additionally, these programs often have access to resources and support services that can benefit children and their families, such as health screenings, nutritional support, and special education services. Head Start also emphasizes family engagement, fostering partnerships between parents and educators to create a supportive and nurturing environment for children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Early Head Start

Early Head Start emerged as a natural extension of the Head Start program. Recognizing the critical importance of early intervention for children from low-income families, Early Head Start was launched in 1995 to provide comprehensive services for infants and toddlers. This program aims to promote children's healthy development, support parents, and strengthen families. Early Head Start centers offer a range of services, including childcare, health screenings, parent education, and home visits. By providing these resources, Early Head Start seeks to give young children a strong foundation for future success.

A typical day in an Early Head Start program is designed to provide a nurturing and stimulating environment for infants and toddlers (children

under 3). Throughout the day, children are encouraged to explore, learn, and interact with their peers and caregivers in a safe and supportive setting. Activities might include free play, group time, story time, outdoor play, meals, and naps. Caregivers are attentive to each child's needs, providing individualized attention and support. The program emphasizes social-emotional development, language skills, and physical activity (Brunton, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024).

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of children from migrant and seasonal farmworker families. These programs differ from traditional Head Start programs by providing full-day, full-week services—often from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., six days a week—to accommodate the demanding schedules of agricultural labor. Operating primarily from May to October in many states, MSHS programs serve children from birth to age 6, offering a safe and nurturing environment while their families work in the fields. Since 1969, MSHS has supported migrant families, and in 1999, services expanded to include seasonal farmworker families. These programs are vital in communities where local childcare options are limited or unavailable during peak agricultural seasons. Without them, many parents would have no option but to bring their children to the fields, where they could be exposed to harmful conditions such as pesticides, dangerous equipment, and extreme weather. MSHS ensures that these children receive high-quality early learning opportunities in a safe and supportive setting, no matter where their families may travel for work.

Preschools

Preschools in the United States have a rich history dating back to the 19th century, as you read about in Chapter 2. Early forms of preschool education emerged as part of social reform movements, aiming to provide care and education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Kindergarten, introduced in the mid-19th century, was one

of the earliest forms of preschool education in the United States. However, it was not until the 20th century that preschools became more widespread and accessible. The Great Depression led to an increase in the need for childcare, and the federal government began to provide funding for nursery schools and other early childhood programs. Since then, preschool education has continued to evolve, with a growing emphasis on preparing children for school success and promoting their social-emotional development.

Preschools play a crucial role in supporting ECE and child development for children ages 2–5. They provide a safe and nurturing environment where children can learn and grow at their own pace. Preschools offer a variety of activities that promote children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development, such as art projects, music exploration, outdoor play, and literacy activities. By fostering a love of learning and building essential skills, preschools prepare children for kindergarten and lay the foundation for future academic success. Additionally, preschools can help to bridge the gap between home and school, providing families with support and resources to enhance their child's learning and development (Michel, 2011).

Family Childcare

As you explored in Chapter 2, family childcare in the United States dates back to the early 20th century. As industrialization led to more women entering the workforce, the need for childcare options increased. Home-based childcare arrangements became a popular solution, providing a familiar and comfortable setting for children. While family childcare has evolved over the years, it remains a significant part of the ECE landscape. Today, family childcare providers offer a variety of services, catering to different family needs and preferences. They often provide a more personalized and intimate experience compared to larger childcare centers, making them a desirable option for many families.

Caregivers in family childcare settings can tailor their approach to

individual children's needs and interests, fostering a strong sense of belonging and security. Additionally, family childcare can offer greater flexibility for families, with options for part-time care or extended hours. By providing a supportive and familiar setting, family childcare can help children develop essential social, emotional, and cognitive skills while also easing the transition to school (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.-a).

Universal Preschool

Universal preschool is a relatively recent development in the United States, gaining significant attention in the early 21st century. The concept of providing free, high-quality preschool education to all children, regardless of their family's income or background, has gained momentum due to increasing research on the benefits of ECE. While there have been some pilot programs and initiatives in various states, universal preschool remains a goal for many advocates and policymakers. The push for universal preschool is often driven by the belief that it can help close educational achievement gaps, improve school readiness, and boost economic growth.

Universal preschool offers several potential benefits, including improved school readiness, reduced achievement gaps, increased workforce participation, and positive economic outcomes. However, implementing universal preschool also presents some challenges. One major concern is the cost, as it requires significant investment in infrastructure, staffing, and curriculum development. Additionally, there are concerns about quality assurance, ensuring that all programs meet the high standards for high-quality play-based ECE. Another consideration is the potential impact on existing early childhood programs, as universal preschool could affect enrollment and funding for other options. Despite these challenges, many advocates argue that the long-term benefits of universal preschool outweigh the costs and that it

is a worthwhile investment in the future of our children (Alliance for Early Success, 2024; Schoof & Koenig, 2022).

Group Centers (Private Childcare)

As reviewed in Chapter 2, childcare centers in the United States have a long history, dating back to the early 20th century. As more women entered the workforce during the Industrial Revolution, the need for reliable childcare options increased. Early childcare centers were often established in connection with factories or other workplaces, providing care for the children of working mothers. Over time, childcare centers evolved to become more specialized and focused on providing educational and developmental experiences for children. The federal government began to play a role in supporting childcare during the Great Depression, with programs like the Works Progress Administration establishing nursery schools. Since then, childcare centers have continued to grow and diversify, offering a range of services and catering to different family needs.

Childcare centers play a vital role in supporting ECE and child development. They provide a safe and nurturing environment where children can learn and grow alongside their peers. Childcare centers often offer a variety of activities and experiences, such as art projects, music classes, outdoor play, and literacy activities. These programs promote children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development, preparing them for future learning and success. Additionally, childcare centers can provide support and resources for families, such as parent–teacher conferences, health screenings, and referrals to community services. By offering a high-quality ECE experience, childcare centers can help children develop a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success.

3.3 PROGRAMMING FOR EACH STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood education and childcare settings must consider different factors for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers due to their distinct developmental stages. Infants require a high level of relationship-based physical and emotional care, including feeding, diapering, and soothing. They are also developing basic motor skills and sensory awareness. Toddlers are more mobile and independent, exploring their environment and learning language skills rapidly. They need a safe and stimulating environment that encourages their curiosity and creativity. Preschoolers are capable of more complex tasks and social interactions. They benefit from programs that promote academic readiness through play, social-emotional development, and language skills. For school-age children, programming should provide a safe, engaging environment that supports their growing independence, offering homework help, opportunities to pursue interests in areas such as sports, arts, and games, and space to build and maintain friendships. By understanding these developmental differences, early childhood programs can provide age-appropriate care and support for children at each stage of their development.

Infant Care (Under 1 Year Old)

Infant childcare options provide a safe and nurturing environment for babies while parents are working or attending to other responsibilities. These options can vary widely, from home-based childcare to specialized infant care centers. High-quality infant childcare programs are designed to provide a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment for babies. They have qualified staff who are trained in infant development and can provide appropriate care and support. These programs offer a variety of activities that promote infants' physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and

language development, such as tummy time, sensory play, and interactive reading. Additionally, high-quality infant childcare programs emphasize communication and collaboration with parents, providing regular updates and opportunities for feedback. The goal of these programs is to help infants develop a strong foundation for future learning and growth (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.-c, n.d.-e).



Figure 3c: Infant Teacher

Toddler Care (1–2 Years Old)

Toddler childcare options offer a stimulating and supportive environment for young children as they develop new skills and explore their surroundings. These options can include childcare centers, family childcare, and nanny or au pair arrangements. High-quality toddler programs prioritize creating a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment for young children. They have qualified staff who understand toddler development and can provide appropriate care and guidance. The programs offer a variety of activities that support toddlers'

physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and language development. These activities may include art projects, music experiences, outdoor play, and story time. High-quality toddler programs emphasize communication and collaboration with parents, providing regular updates and opportunities for feedback. The goal of these programs is to help toddlers develop a strong foundation for future learning and growth (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.-a, n.d.-d).



Figure 3d: Montessori toddler classroom

Preschool Care (3–5 Years Old)

Preschool education and childcare options offer a variety of programs to prepare young children for kindergarten and beyond. These options can include preschools, childcare centers, and family childcare. Preschools often focus on academic readiness, social-emotional development, and language skills. When choosing a preschool or childcare option, parents

should consider factors such as the program's philosophy, the quality of care provided, and the overall fit with their child's individual needs and family's lifestyle.



Figure 3e: Children playing in preschool classroom.

High-quality preschool programs are characterized by several key features. They typically have a well-defined curriculum that promotes children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. The programs are staffed by qualified early childhood educators who provide nurturing and supportive care. Classrooms are designed to be safe, stimulating, and age-appropriate. High-quality programs also prioritize parent involvement, fostering partnerships between families and educators. Additionally, these programs often have access to resources and support services that can benefit children and their families, such as health screenings, nutritional support, and special education services (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.-b).

School-Age Childcare (Kindergarten–5th Grade)

School-age childcare programs offer a safe and supervised environment for children when school is not in session. These programs can be found in schools, community centers, or private businesses. They often provide a variety of activities, such as homework help, arts and crafts, sports, and games. School-age childcare is a valuable resource for working parents or families who need extra support.



Figure 3f: School-age classroom.

School-age childcare options vary widely to meet different family needs.

Some programs are operated by schools themselves, while others are offered by community centers or private businesses. There are specialized programs for children with special needs, as well as those offering before and after-school care or full-day care during school breaks. Additionally, transportation to and from school may be available. This variety allows families to choose the program that best suits their child and their lifestyle (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.-e).

Now that you have an understanding of the various early childhood and school-age care settings—as well as the unique developmental needs of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children—it is important to know how to recognize high-quality care in each environment. One helpful way to do this is by using a checklist that highlights key indicators of quality. This checklist can guide you in observing and evaluating how well a program supports children's health, safety, learning, and relationships. Let's take a closer look at the elements that define a high-quality early care and education setting in Table 3b.

Table 3b

Checklist for High-Quality Early Childhood Education Programs	
Physical Environment	• **Safe and Secure:** The facility is well-maintained, free of hazards, and adequately secured. • **Age-Appropriate:** The environment is designed to meet the needs of the children's age group. • **Inviting and Stimulating:** The classroom is bright, colorful, and filled with age-appropriate materials and activities. • **Outdoor Play Space:** The program provides ample outdoor space for children to play and explore.
Curriculum and Instruction	• **Developmentally Appropriate:** The curriculum is aligned with children's developmental stages and interests. • **Balanced Approach:** The curriculum includes a balance of academic, social-emotional, and physical development. • **Qualified Teachers:** The program employs well-trained and experienced early childhood educators. • **Individualized Attention:** Teachers provide individualized attention to each child, meeting their unique needs.
Family Engagement	• **Open Communication:** The program maintains open and regular communication with families. • **Family Involvement:** Families are encouraged to participate in program activities and events. • **Partnerships:** The program fosters strong partnerships between families and educators.

Health and Safety	• **Health Policies:** The program has clear health policies and procedures in place. • **Safety:** Required safety trainings and checks are conducted. • **Nutrition:** Children are provided with nutritious meals and snacks. • **Health Screenings:** Regular health screenings are conducted.
Program Philosophy	• **Child-Centered:** The program focuses on the child's individual needs and interests. • **Play-Based Learning:** Play is a central component of the curriculum. • **Culturally Responsive:** The program is inclusive and respectful of diverse cultures.
Program Evaluation	• **Ongoing Assessment:** The program regularly assesses its effectiveness and makes necessary adjustments. • **Feedback:** The program seeks feedback from families, staff, and the community.

By considering these factors, you can evaluate the quality of an ECE program.

Reflect

Consider these questions as you think about what type of early childhood setting in which you would like to work:

1. What type of setting would you like to work in or explore further?
2. Do you prefer a more child-centered or teacher-directed approach? Explain why.
3. Are you interested in a program with a specific focus, such as nature-based, bilingual, or special needs education? Explain why.

Scenario: *Choosing the Right Preschool*

Imagine you are a parent choosing a preschool for your child. You want to find a program where your child feels safe, supported, and excited to learn each day. As you visit different preschools, you observe classrooms, speak with teachers, and review program materials. Some preschools emphasize structured academics, while others focus on play-based learning. One school is close to your home, while another has a reputation for strong family involvement and cultural inclusivity. The decision feels both exciting and overwhelming, as you consider what kind of environment will best support your child's growth and happiness.

Here are some questions to consider:

- What are the most important qualities you would look

for in a preschool program?

- How would you evaluate the quality of the teaching staff?
- What factors would influence your decision regarding the curriculum and activities offered?
- How important is the physical environment of the preschool?
- What role do you think parents should play in their child's early childhood education?

Share your thoughts on what makes a high-quality preschool program.

3.4 CONCLUSION

Understanding the diverse types of ECE settings is essential for recognizing how each environment supports children's unique developmental needs. From family childcare homes and center-based programs to school-age care and informal arrangements, each setting offers different strengths aligned with the age and stage of the children they serve. By differentiating the programming for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children, educators can make informed decisions that promote optimal learning and development. This foundational knowledge helps ensure that each child is placed in a nurturing and developmentally appropriate environment that fosters growth, exploration, and success.

3.5 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=70#h5p-5

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=70#h5p-6

3.6 REFERENCES

Administration for Children & Families. *(n.d.-a). Family child care homes*. ChildCare.gov. https://childcare.gov/consumer-education/family-child-care-homes

Administration for Children & Families. (n.d.-b). *School-age childcare and camp programs*. ChildCare.gov. https://childcare.gov/consumer-education/school-age-

child-care#:~:text=School%2Dage%20programs%2C%20also%20known,schedule%20and%20school%20year%20calendar

Administration for Children & Families. (n.d.-c). *What are my childcare options?* ChildCare.gov. https://childcare.gov/consumer-education/childcare-options

Alliance for Early Success. (2024). *What is universal pre-K?* https://earlysuccess.org/what-is-universal-pre-k/

Brunton, R. (2019). *Research: Early head start improves outcomes for children and families*. ZERO TO THREE. https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/research-early-head-start-improves-outcomes-for-children-and-families/

Google AI. Gemini. (October 2024 version). [Large language model]. https://gemini.google.com/

Gordon, A. M., & Browne, K. W. (2017). *Beginnings & beyond: Foundations in early childhood education* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Haigh, K. (2009). *An approach for all children: Reinterpreting the Reggio Emilia approach in the USA*. Community Playthings. https://www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/reinterpreting-the-reggio-emilia-approach-in-the-usa-an-approach-for-all-children

Maria Montessori Training Organization. (2024). *What is Montessori?* Maria Montessori Institute. https://www.mariamontessori.org/about-us/what-is-montessori/

Michel, S. (2011). *History of childcare in the U.S.* VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project. https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/child-care-the-american-history/

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-a). *A high-quality program for your toddler*. https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-toddler

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-b). *A high-quality program for your preschooler*. https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-preschooler

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-c). *What*

does a high-quality program for infants look like? NAEYC. https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/high-quality-program-for-infant

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-d). *What does a high-quality program for toddlers look like?* NAEYC. https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/what-does-high-quality-program-for-toddler-look-like

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-e). *What you want to see in a high-quality infant program*. NAEYC. https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/what-you-want-to-see-infant-program

North American Association for Environmental Education. (2023). *Nature preschools in the United States: 2022 national survey* [PDF]. Natural Start. https://naturalstart.org/sites/default/files/staff/natstart_2022_national_survey_final_draft.pdf

Reggio Emilia Approach. (2022). *Reggio children*. https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/

Schoof, J., & Koenig, B. (2022). *Universal pre-K would block innovation, harm children*. The Heritage Foundation. https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/universal-pre-k-would-block-innovation-harm-children

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). *About the early Head Start program*. https://headstart.gov/programs/article/about-early-head-start-program?redirect=eclkc

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.-a). *About the office of Head Start*. HeadStart.gov. https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/office-head-start-ohs

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.-b). *Head Start history*. The Administration for Children and Families. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about/history-head-start

Whitaker, R. C., Becker, B. D., Herman, A. N., & Gooze, R. A. (2013). The physical and mental health of Head Start staff: The Pennsylvania Head

Start staff wellness survey, 2012. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 10, E181. https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd10.130171

Workman, S., & Ullrich, R. (2024). *Quality 101: Identifying the core components of a high-quality early childhood program*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/quality-101-identifying-the-core-components-of-a-high-quality-early-childhood-program/

Images:

Figure 3a: "IMG_2791" by Nora Zubriski is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Figure 3b: "IMG-0835" by Nora Zubriski is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Figure 3c: "USMC-13222.jpg" by unknown author for U.S. Marines is in the Public Domain. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

Figure 3d: "IMG_6958" by Nora Ziburski is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Figure 3e: Google AI. Gemini. (2025). *Flash 2.0*. [Artificial intelligence system]. https://gemini.google.com/

Figure 3f: Google AI. Gemini. (2025). *Flash 2.0*. [Artificial intelligence system]. https://gemini.google.com/

Chapter 4: Exploring Regulatory Requirements: Early Childhood Education Programs in Wisconsin

AMANDA DOHMS, MSED

Course Competency: *Explore regulatory requirements for early childhood education programs in Wisconsin*

Learning Objectives:

- Explore group childcare regulatory requirements
- Explore family childcare (licensing, certification, provisional) regulatory requirements

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Wisconsin, childcare is regulated (monitored) to ensure that children are in safe, healthy, and nurturing environments. According to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families:

> "Under Wisconsin law, no person may provide care and supervision for four (4) or more children under the age of 7 for less than 24 hours a day unless that person obtains a license to operate a childcare center from the Department."

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families oversees childcare regulation. They monitor all regulated care in Wisconsin, ensuring that every environment meets the minimum health and safety standards. They also provide resources and tools for providers to help them meet and even exceed these standards to ensure children and families have access to high-quality childcare.

4.2 LICENSED VS. CERTIFIED CHILDCARE

Wisconsin offers two types of regulated childcare: licensed and certified. Each type of care offers unique benefits, ensuring families have access to safe and supportive childcare options in Wisconsin's communities.

Licensed Care

Licensed providers care for four or more unrelated children under age 7 and must meet specific state regulations.

There are three different categories of state licensed care (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.):

- **Licensed Family Childcare Centers:** Typically, in the provider's home for between 4 and 8 children.
- **Licensed Group Childcare Centers:** Typically, located somewhere other than a home and can be small or large in size and are for more than 9 children.
- **Licensed Day Camps:** Seasonal programs typically operated in an outdoor setting that provide experiences for 4 or more children 3 years of age and older.

Certified Care

Certified providers, though voluntarily regulated, can care for up to three unrelated children under age 7. Certification is available for family childcare providers who are not required to be licensed, but who wish to care for children in their home (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.).

Benefits of Childcare Certification

- Provider is able to care for Wisconsin Shares-subsidized children.
- Provider may participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program.
- Provider may get parent referrals from Child Care Resource and Referral Agency.

4.3 GROUP CHILDCARE REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

In Wisconsin, group childcare centers can provide care and supervision for less than 24 hours a day for nine or more children who are not related to the provider. These centers are typically located somewhere other than a home and are typically what you think of when you hear the terms “daycare” or “childcare center.”



Figure 4a: Group childcare classroom.

Group centers are required to be licensed in Wisconsin. All group care facilities must follow the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Licensing Rules for Group Child Care Centers.

The Group Child Care Licensing Manual PDF has information about the rules regarding the following information in Table 4a that is important for early childhood educators to know (Bureau of Early Care Regulation, 2020b).

Table 4a

Contents of the Group Child Care Licensing Manual	
Contents	**Descriptions**
Operational Requirements	• Terms of a license • Reports • Parents • Children's records • Confidentiality • Reporting child abuse and neglect
Staff Records and Qualifications	• Definitions of staff • Qualification of staff • Staff development
Supervision and Grouping of Children	• Supervising children • Child-to-staff ratios • Grouping children

Physical Plan and Equipment	• Building information • Emergency plans and drills • Fire protection • Indoor spaces • Outdoor spaces
Programming	• Planning • Scheduling • Guidance • Equipment and furnishings • Rest periods • Meals and food service • Health • Pets and animals
Transportation	• Permission • Emergency information • Driver and vehicles • Safety restraints

Licensing Administration	• Conditions of license • Types of licenses • Revoking a license
Additional Requirements for the Following: • **Infant and Toddlers** • **Staff in School-Age Programs**	• Infants and toddlers ◦ Daily programming ◦ Feeding ◦ Diapering and toileting • Staff in school-age programs ◦ Staff roles

Being familiar with and understanding the *Wisconsin Group Child Care Licensing Manual* is a critical component of becoming a competent early childhood educator because these regulations serve as the foundation for high-quality childcare. While the information may seem extensive, each regulation serves a purpose. Knowing and applying these guidelines helps teachers in the following ways:

- Keeps children safe, healthy, and engaged
- Ensures their classroom meets legal and ethical standards
- Provides a developmentally appropriate and inclusive learning environment
- Maintains professional integrity and credibility

By mastering these regulations, teachers become more confident,

competent, and effective in their role—ultimately improving outcomes for the children and families they serve.

4.4 FAMILY CHILDCARE REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

In Wisconsin, childcare providers who offer care in a home setting may either be licensed or certified, depending on the number of children they care for. A licensed family childcare program provides care and supervision for no more than eight children who are not related to the provider for less than 24 hours a day. However, some family childcare providers are not required to be licensed but may still choose to obtain certification. Certification is a voluntary form of regulation for providers caring for fewer than four children under 7 years of age. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) 202 administrative rule outlines the standards for certification, ensuring that those caring for one to three children or those who do not require a license still meet basic quality and safety standards.

Additionally, providers may receive provisional certification, which is issued to childcare operators who have demonstrated compliance with certification standards but have not yet met the requirements for entry-level training. Provisional certification is limited to 6 months, allowing providers time to complete the necessary training while still offering care.



Figure 4b: Family childcare setting.

The Family Child Care Licensing Manual PDF has information about the rules regarding the items identified in Table 4b. This information is important for early childhood educators to know (Bureau of Early Care Regulation, 2020a).

Table 4b

Contents of the Family Child Care Licensing Manual	
Contents	**Descriptions**
Operational Requirements	• Terms of a license • Reports • Parents • Children's records • Confidentiality • Reporting child abuse and neglect
Staff Records and Qualifications	• Definitions of staff • Qualification of staff • Staff development
Supervision and Grouping of Children	• Supervising children • Child-to-staff ratios • Grouping children
Physical Plant and Equipment	• Building information • Emergency plans and drills • Fire protection • Indoor spaces • Outdoor spaces

Programming	• Planning • Scheduling • Guidance • Equipment and furnishings • Rest periods • Meals and food service • Health • Pets and animals
Transportation	• Permission • Emergency information • Driver and vehicles • Safety restraints
Licensing Administration	• Conditions of license • Types of licenses • Revoking a license

Additional Requirements for the Following: • **Infant and Toddlers** • **Night Care**	• Infants and toddlers ◦ Daily programming ◦ Feeding ◦ Diapering and toileting • Night care ◦ General requirements ◦ Program ◦ Preventive measures ◦ Feeding ◦ Sleep

Family childcare takes place in a home setting, offering a smaller group size and allows for personalized attention and a comfortable, family-like atmosphere. When providers thoroughly understand and apply these regulations, they enhance their confidence, competence, and effectiveness, ultimately creating better experiences and outcomes for the children and families in their care.

Reflect

How does a strong understanding of Wisconsin childcare regulations directly support early childhood educators in providing high-quality care for young children and their families?

4.5 SCHOOL-AGED CHILDCARE REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

In Wisconsin, school-aged childcare is regulated by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to ensure safe, supportive, and developmentally appropriate environments for children ages 5 through 12 before and after school, during holidays, and throughout the summer. These programs may operate as part of a licensed group childcare center, a family childcare home, or a public/private community-based program. Wisconsin regulations require that school-age programs meet specific health and safety standards, including staff-to-child ratios, supervision policies, emergency procedures, and physical space requirements. For example, licensed group centers must maintain a minimum staff-to-child ratio of 1:18 for school-aged children. Programs must also support children's growing independence while providing structured routines, homework help, and opportunities for enrichment through play, arts, recreation, and social interaction. By adhering to these standards, school-aged childcare programs in Wisconsin aim to offer a safe and enriching environment that supports children's growth outside the regular school day (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.).

4.6 CONCLUSION

To maintain high standards, the Monitoring Guide for Wisconsin's Licensed and Public School Child Care Programs PDF outlines how the Bureau of Early Care Regulation (BECR) ensures compliance with state regulations. BECR conducts on-site visits to licensed group and family childcare centers, as well as day camps, to verify that providers meet all

licensing requirements. These visits help uphold quality, safety, and consistency in childcare settings across Wisconsin.

Providing quality childcare takes commitment, knowledge, and the right resources. Regulated childcare providers are skilled professionals trained to support children's growth in safe and nurturing environments. Their work has a lasting impact, helping children build strong foundations for learning and development. The ultimate goal is to provide care that fosters each child's potential and well-being (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2025).

4.7 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Test your understanding of childcare regulations by dragging the boxes that belong to each childcare category.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=85#h5p-18

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=85#h5p-7

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=85#h5p-8

4.8 REFERENCES

Bureau of Early Care Regulation. (2020). *DCF 250 Licensing rules for family child care centers with commentary*. Wisconsin Department of Children and Families [PDF]. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/4069.pdf

Bureau of Early Care Regulation. (2020). *DCF 251 Licensing rules for group child care centers with commentary*. Wisconsin Department of Children and Families [PDF]. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/4024.pdf

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2025). *Regulated child care providers are skilled professionals – Child care resource guide for families*. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/parents/resource-guide/skilled-professionals

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (n.d.). *Wisconsin child care regulation*. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/ccregulation

Images:

Figure 4a: "5679294322_caa72259b5_k" by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Europe District is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Figure 4b: Open AI. (2025). *Chat GPT 4o.* [Artificial intelligence system]. https://chatgpt.com/

Chapter 5: Identifying Quality Indicators: Ensuring Excellence in Early Childhood Education Programs

MARY BETH BOETTCHER, MSED

Course Competency: *Identify quality indicators in early childhood education programs*

Learning Objectives:

- Understand and articulate the principles of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP)
- Explain the accreditation process and its importance in maintaining high standards of quality in early childhood programs
- Explain how YoungStar criteria are used to assess and improve the quality of childcare programs
- Understand the role of environmental rating scales (ERS) in guiding improvements to early childhood education environments

5.1 INTRODUCTION

To ensure that early childhood education (ECE) programs provide the

best possible environment for young learners, it is important to not only recognize but also understand the quality indicators that define exceptional early childhood settings. In ECE, quality refers to the intentional, research-based practices and environments that promote children's learning, development, and well-being. High-quality programs are characterized by warm, responsive relationships, developmentally appropriate curriculum, inclusive and engaging environments, and strong partnerships with families. These indicators—spanning curriculum, teacher–child interactions, family engagement, staff qualifications, health and safety practices, and the physical environment—serve as the foundation for creating spaces where all children can thrive.

Quality in ECE matters because early experiences shape brain development, social-emotional growth, and lifelong learning. Children who attend high-quality programs are more likely to enter school ready to learn, build healthy relationships, and succeed academically and socially. This chapter will explore how these quality indicators contribute to creating equitable, nurturing, and supportive environments—ensuring that every child has access to early learning experiences that promote their growth and potential.

5.2 DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is a teaching approach in ECE that focuses on meeting children where they are developmentally, contextually, and individually.

Here's a simple breakdown to help you see it from a bird's eye view:

1. **Understanding Developmental Stages:** DAP is based on the idea that children grow and learn at different rates. Educators use their

knowledge of child development to create activities that are suitable for the age and stage of each child.

2. **Individual Needs and Interests:** Every child is unique, with their own strengths, interests, and needs. DAP encourages teachers to get to know each child and tailor their teaching methods to support each child's individual journey.
3. **Creating Engaging Learning Experiences:** DAP emphasizes making learning fun and engaging. Activities are designed to be hands-on and interactive, helping children explore and discover through play and exploration.
4. **Holistic Development:** DAP supports all areas of a child's development—cognitive (thinking), social (interacting with others), emotional (understanding and expressing feelings), and physical (movement and coordination).
5. **Responsive Teaching:** Teachers using DAP are flexible and responsive. They observe children closely and adjust their teaching strategies to better support each child's learning and development.

In essence, DAP is about creating a nurturing and supportive environment where every child can thrive and develop a love for learning.

> Educators who engage in developmentally appropriate practice foster young children's joyful learning and maximize the opportunities for each and every child to achieve their full potential. (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.-a)

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) DAP Position Statement defines developmentally appropriate practice as methods that promote each child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach. DAP emphasizes creating joyful, engaged learning experiences that are tailored to the individual needs, cultural backgrounds, and developmental stages of each child. It supports educators in making intentional, informed

decisions to foster children's growth across all domains—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical.

The three core considerations of DAP, as outlined by NAEYC, are described in Table 5a.

Table 5a

Three Core Considerations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)	
Commonality in Child Development and Learning	Understanding what is generally true about how children develop and learn at different ages and stages. This includes recognizing patterns of growth in all developmental domains—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical—based on research and child development theories.
Individuality of Each Child	Recognizing that each child is unique, with their own interests, abilities, and developmental progress. Educators must observe and assess children to tailor experiences that meet their specific strengths, needs, and learning styles.
Cultural and Social Context	Acknowledging that a child's development is influenced by their family, culture, community, and lived experiences. Teachers must create inclusive environments that respect and reflect diverse backgrounds while ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all children.

By considering these three factors, educators can implement practices that truly support the needs of every child in a developmentally appropriate way. Educators that engage in developmentally appropriate practices foster joyful learning, which helps to maximize each child's full potential.

Children are born eager to learn and their environments play a powerful role in nurturing that curiosity. In Figure 5a below, the child's grandmother is an educator, and her home is filled with books and educational materials. The child in the image has made a connection to reading and is actively exploring his grandmother's books and learning materials, demonstrating how responsive environments can spark early literacy and a love of learning.



Figure 5a: Child playing.

Additional Resources

- Unlocking Young Minds: DAP Video 1
- Unlocking Young Minds: DAP Video 2
- **NAEYC Resources:** The National Association for the Education of Young Children offers a wealth of information on DAP, including position statements, articles, and guidelines. Their website is a great starting point for understanding the principles and applications of DAP.

Reflect

How do the three core considerations of DAP—commonality, individuality, and cultural context—show up in your current or future work with children? Can you think of a time when considering one of these helped support a child's development?

5.3 ACCREDITATION

Accreditation in ECE is a voluntary process through which programs demonstrate their commitment to high-quality standards that promote the well-being and development of young children. It involves an in-depth evaluation of various aspects of a program, including its curriculum, teaching practices, staff qualifications, and environment. Achieving accreditation ensures that a program meets or exceeds established benchmarks, providing families with confidence that their children are receiving the best care and educational experiences. There are a variety of accrediting bodies in ECE in addition to the two described below.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a professional organization that sets high standards for ECE programs.

NAEYC accreditation ensures that early childhood programs provide high-quality care and education. It shows that a program meets rigorous standards in areas like curriculum, teaching, health, safety, and family engagement.

The Accreditation Process

- **Self-Study:** Programs start by evaluating their own practices against NAEYC standards.
- **Application:** They submit an application to NAEYC, showing their commitment to meeting these standards.
- **Site Visit:** NAEYC sends trained assessors to visit the program, observe classrooms, and review documentation.
- **Decision:** Based on the visit and the program's documentation, NAEYC decides whether to grant accreditation.

Benefits of Accreditation

- **Quality Assurance:** Accreditation confirms that the program provides a safe, nurturing, and effective learning environment.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Accredited programs commit to ongoing improvement and professional development.
- **Trust and Recognition:** Families can trust that accredited programs meet high standards, and programs gain recognition for their quality.

NAEYC accreditation is a way for early childhood programs to demonstrate their dedication to providing excellent care and education for young children. Read more about NAEYC accreditation at Early Learning Program Accreditation | NAEYC website.

National Association for Family Childcare (NAFCC) Accreditation

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) provides accreditation for home-based childcare providers. It ensures that family childcare homes meet high standards of care, learning, and professionalism.

The Accreditation Process

- **Self-Study and Application:** Providers assess their program and submit an application.
- **Observation Visit:** A trained observer evaluates interactions, learning materials, and the home environment.
- **Accreditation Decision:** Providers meeting NAFCC's high-quality standards receive accreditation.

Benefits of NAFCC Accreditation

- **Quality Assurance:** Validates the quality of family childcare programs.
- **Professional Development:** Enhances professional credibility and career growth.
- **Family Confidence:** Provides families with assurance of a nurturing and educational home-based setting.

NAFCC accreditation is a way for family childcare programs to demonstrate their dedication to providing excellent care and education for young children. Read more about NAFCC accreditation at the NAFCC Accreditation website.

Wisconsin has a one-of-a-kind program for family childcare providers, Satellite Family Child Care (SFCC), that provides accreditation to family childcare programs throughout the state. These programs are recognized

as meeting the highest standards in early care and education. Family childcare programs that participate in this accreditation have access to a variety of services such as professional development, mentorship, family referral system, equipment and book loans, ongoing support from consultants.

Accreditation from organizations like NAEYC, NAFCC, and others ensures that ECE programs maintain high-quality standards that promote child development, safety, and learning. These accreditations give families confidence in the care their children receive while encouraging programs to engage in continuous improvement and professional excellence.

Additional Resource

View video on NAEYC accreditation: NAEYC Accreditation

Reflect

1. Why do you think some early childhood programs choose to pursue accreditation while others do not?
2. How might accreditation impact a family's decision when choosing a care or education program?

5.4 YOUNGSTAR

YoungStar is Wisconsin's childcare quality rating and improvement system. It is designed to help providers improve the quality of their business and program practices. It evaluates and rates childcare programs to help parents choose the best options for their children (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.-a).

YoungStar has a website where parents can search for childcare called Child Care Finder. The goal of the website is for parents to have access to high-quality childcare, so parents can make informed childcare decisions and identify quality standards that meet the unique needs of their children and families.

Youngstar also helps to support Wisconsin's early educators by offering a variety of low-cost or free training programs covering key topics in ECE. The goal with this and technical assistance is to improve the quality of childcare in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.-b).

How Does It Work?

- **YoungStar is a Quality Rating System:** Childcare programs are rated on a scale from one to five stars, with five stars indicating the highest quality. These ratings are based on several factors, including the learning environment, staff qualifications, and business practices. Parents can see at a glance how a particular program is meeting the quality standards (NAEYC, 2019).
- **Assessment:** Programs undergo a comprehensive assessment to determine their rating. This includes observations and reviews of their practices and policies. Each provider is rated around four important areas of care:

    1. The childcare staff's education and training

2. The learning environment and curriculum
3. The program's business and professional practices
4. The child's health and well-being

- **Improvement Support:** YoungStar provides resources, training, and technical assistance to help childcare providers improve their quality. This support helps programs move up the rating scale.

Why Does It Matter?

High-quality childcare positively impacts children's development, including their cognitive, social, and emotional well-being. See the benefits for both parents and providers in Table 5a.

Table 5b

YoungStar Benefits for Parents and Providers	
For Parents	YoungStar ratings make it easier for parents to find high-quality childcare that fits their needs. The ratings provide a clear, objective measure of a program's quality.
For Providers	Childcare providers receive guidance and support to enhance their services. This can lead to better outcomes for children and increased trust from families (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.-b).

In Wisconsin, YoungStar is a valuable tool for both parents and childcare providers, promoting high standards and continuous improvement in ECE.

Additional Resources

- YoungStar 101 (PowerPoint presentation)
- YoungStar For Providers – Rating Criteria and Tips for

Achieving Highest Possible Rating
- Find Your Local YoungStar Office

5.5 ENVIRONMENTAL RATING SCALES

Environmental rating scales (ERS) are standardized tools designed to evaluate various aspects of early childhood settings, such as classrooms and childcare centers. They help ensure that these environments are conducive to children's learning and development. There are four different types of environmental rating scales:

- **Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS):** Used for settings with children from birth to 2.5 years old
- **Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS):** Used for preschool and kindergarten settings, typically for children ages 2.5–5 years
- **School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS):** Used for programs serving school-age children
- **Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS):** Used for home-based childcare settings

What Do Environmental Rating Scales Measure?

ERS tools assess various components of the learning environment, including the following (UNC-Chapel Hill, n.d.):

- **Space and Furnishings:** The physical setup and materials available such as indoor space; furnishings for care, play, and learning; room

arrangements for play and learning; space for privacy, child-related display; space for gross motor play; and gross motor equipment
- **Personal Care Routines:** Meals/snacks, toileting/diapering, health practices, and safety practices
- **Language and Literacy:** Opportunities for language development and literacy activities such as helping children expand vocabulary, encouraging children to use language, staff using books with children, encouraging children's use of books, and becoming familiar with print
- **Learning Activities:** Variety and appropriateness of activities offered such as fine motor, art, music and movement, blocks, dramatic play, nature/science, math materials and activities, math in daily events, understanding written numbers, promoting acceptance of diversity, and appropriate use of technology
- **Interactions:** Quality of interactions between children and teachers such as supervision of gross motor, individualized teaching and learning, staff-child interaction, peer interaction, and discipline
- **Program Structure:** Daily schedule and organization such as transitions and wait times, free play, whole-group activities for play and learning, daily schedule, and balance of activities

Why Are Environmental Rating Scales Important?

- **Quality Assurance:** They provide a reliable way to measure the quality of early childhood environments, ensuring they meet high standards.
- **Guidance for Improvement:** The results from ERS assessments help educators identify strengths and areas for improvement, guiding them to enhance their programs.
- **Support for Development:** High-quality environments, as measured by ERS, support children's overall development, including their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.

As you can see, environmental rating scales are valuable tools that help

ensure ECE environments are high-quality and supportive of children's development.

Additional Resources

- Environmental Rating Scales
- ECERS – Third Edition
- ITERS-3 (Infant and Toddler)
- SACERS-U (School-Age)
- FCCERS-3 (Family Childcare)
- Relationship between ECERS and Child Outcomes

5.6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the essential quality indicators in ECE programs. By understanding and implementing developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), recognizing the importance of accreditation, utilizing the YoungStar criteria, and applying environmental rating scales (ERS), educators can significantly enhance the quality of ECE environments. These practices and standards ensure that programs are not only safe and nurturing but also developmentally appropriate, fostering the holistic development and well-being of young children. Applying these principles will help create enriching and supportive learning experiences that lay a strong foundation for children's future success.

5.7 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=87#h5p-11

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=87#h5p-9

5.8 REFERENCES

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-a). *Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) position statement*. https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.-b). *Early learning program quality assessment & accreditation*. https://www.naeyc.org/accreditation/quality-assessment-and-accreditation

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). *NAEYC*

accreditation [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjMumYJl4Og

National Association for Family Child Care. (2024). *About us*. https://nafcc.org/about-us/

UNC-Chapel Hill. (n.d.). *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition*. Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute: Environment Rating Scales. https://ers.fpg.unc.edu/scales-early-childhood-environment-rating-scale-third-edition.html

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (n.d.-a). *YoungStar*. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (n.d.-b). *YoungStar for providers*. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/providers

Images:

Figure 5a: Child playing by Mary Beth Boettcher is used with permission.

Chapter 6: Summarizing the Responsibilities: Early Childhood Education Professionals in Action

TRACY JACOBSON, MSED

Course Competency: *Describe the roles and responsibilities of the various job positions in early childhood education*

Learning Objectives:

- Describe professional behaviors of early educators
- Describe ethical behaviors of early educators using the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct as a guide
- Identify the importance of advocacy for the early childhood education professional
- Describe the Wisconsin Core Competencies For Professionals Working with Young Children & Their Families

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is an essential field that plays an important role in shaping young children's lives. It provides a nurturing

and stimulating environment for children to learn, grow, and develop essential skills. Within this field, a variety of job positions exist, each with unique responsibilities and contributions to the overall well-being of children.

This chapter will explore the various job positions and the roles and responsibilities of each position, highlighting the skills and qualifications required to excel in these roles. By understanding the career paths available within this field, individuals can make thoughtful decisions about their career path in ECE.

6.2 JOB POSITIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early childhood education offers a rewarding and fulfilling career path for those who enjoy working with young children. There are a variety of career options available, each with its unique responsibilities and opportunities for growth. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) 250 and 251 are Wisconsin statutes related to childcare licensing. While these statutes primarily outline licensing requirements and regulations, they indirectly reference various job positions within the childcare industry. The most common career paths in ECE are in Table 6a.

Table 6a (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2023)

Early Childhood Education Job Positions	
Direct Care Positions	
Childcare Teacher	Responsible for planning and implementing age-appropriate activities, ensuring children's safety and well-being, and communicating with parents
Family Childcare Provider	Operates a home-based childcare program, caring for a small group of children
Nanny or Au Pair	Cares for children in a private home setting
Childcare Assistant Teacher	Supports the childcare teacher in various tasks, such as assisting with activities, changing diapers, and supervising children
Administrative Positions	
Childcare Director	Oversees the overall operations of a childcare center, including staff management, curriculum development, and compliance with regulations
Childcare Administrator	Handles administrative tasks, such as financial management, licensing renewals, and staff training
Program Coordinator	Plans and coordinates specific programs or activities within a childcare center, such as before-school and after-school care or summer camp
Support Staff Positions	
Food Service/ Cook	Prepares meals and snacks for children, ensuring they meet nutritional guidelines
Bus Driver	Transports children to and from the childcare center
Maintenance Staff	Maintains the physical facilities of the childcare center, including cleaning, repairs, and safety inspections
Specialized Positions	
Child Development Specialist	Conducts research and development in early childhood education, working on curriculum development or program evaluation
Head Start Teacher	Educates and supports families in program or home settings to help meet their child's needs and works with children to help them reach their full potential

Early Childhood Special Education Teacher	Works with children with special needs, providing individualized instruction and support
Early Childhood Consultant	Provides expertise and guidance to early childhood education programs, helping them to improve their quality and effectiveness
Parent Educator	Provides guidance, support, and resources to families
Home Visitor	Provides resources and support to families and children in their home

These are just a few examples of job positions that might be relevant to DCF 250 and 251. The specific requirements and responsibilities for each position may vary depending on the size and type of childcare facility. With the right training and experience, individuals can find a fulfilling and rewarding career in this field (Google, 2024). While job titles help define roles, it is the day-to-day responsibilities and motivations of early childhood professionals that truly shape their impact. The following section explores the personal and professional attributes that educators bring to their work.

6.3 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN JOB POSITIONS

Early childhood education draws in people with varied stories, backgrounds, and reasons for choosing this profession. There are educators who earn a degree in ECE with the goal of working at a childcare center or preschool. Parents choose to be at home with their children and start a family childcare to care for not only their own children, but also those from families who want a home setting for their child. Some are drawn to the field to foster the kind of childhood they

experienced. Others recognize what was lacking in their own development and want to create better environments and experiences for children. Whatever the motivation, something drew them to this field. All share commitment to the important work of caring for young children. Versatility and adaptability are cornerstone qualities essential to meeting professional challenges successfully and with integrity. Early childhood educators play a crucial role in shaping young minds and laying the foundation for future learning. Their responsibilities extend beyond simply teaching; they foster growth, development, and a love for learning in their students. The most effective educators are attentive, flexible, and willing to continually learn and grow in their knowledge of providing high quality care.

Scenario

It is Monday morning. Ann arrives at the center where she works and opens the door to her preschool classroom. She opens the shades to let in some natural light. She finds calming music to play in the background. She opens the sensory table and adds small rocks, sticks, and scoopers to the sand the children have been exploring for the past 2 weeks. Ann continues moving around the room adding a few new books to the classroom library along with a few puppets, and putting out paint, paper, and a collection of tools for children to explore. She hears children's voices and goes to the door to greet them as they burst into the classroom, ready for the day.



Figure 6a: Educator playing with children at table.

Developing and Maintaining Relationships With Children

Building strong relationships with children is at the heart of an educator's role. Each interaction—whether calming a child after a minor injury, offering a warm greeting at the door, or sharing in the wonder of a caterpillar on the windowsill—offers a meaningful opportunity to connect. These moments are often spontaneous, requiring educators to respond with empathy, care, and intention. By combining knowledge of child development with an appreciation for each child's individuality,

educators create a nurturing environment grounded in trust. Their confidence, responsiveness, and consistency shape the emotional climate of the classroom and support every child's sense of belonging and well-being.

Managing Classrooms

Effective classroom management and child guidance is crucial for creating a safe, nurturing, and conducive learning environment for young children. This responsibility requires early educators to create a positive learning environment that promotes children's social, emotional, language, physical, and cognitive development. The following are some key strategies for classroom management:

- **Create a Safe Environment:** The setting promotes learning and exploration and is inviting, organized, and sensory-rich.
- **Clear Expectations:** Daily routines provide structure where needed, and there are opportunities for independence and choice. Observations and active listening foster a sense of belonging and connection through positive communication.
- **Effective Communication:** Allows for the wants and needs of both adults and children to be met. Body language, tone, facial expressions, and verbal and nonverbal communication set the tone for teaching and learning.
- **Prioritize Relationships:** Get to know each child and their unique needs and interests. There is a strong partnership between teacher and family.

Planning and Evaluating Curriculum

Effective curriculum planning and evaluation in ECE is essential for providing high-quality learning experiences for young children. Curriculum refers to the planned framework of goals, content, learning

experiences, and teaching strategies used to support children's development across all domains. The educator continually observes and evaluates what is happening in the classroom by noting how and where children played, the quality of their interactions, and ideas for what to plan next based on children's interests and developmental needs. It gives meaning and support to their learning. Observations are shared with other staff and often used to build emergent curriculum.

Emergent curriculum is a child-centered approach to curriculum planning where educators develop activities and projects based on the children's interests, skills, needs, and the unique context of their learning environment. Instead of following a predetermined curriculum, emergent curriculum is responsive and flexible, evolving from the children's natural curiosity, questions, interactions, and play. Educators act as observers, facilitators, and co-learners, carefully listening to and documenting the children's explorations to identify emerging themes and interests that can then be further investigated through various activities and projects.

Respecting and incorporating families' cultural beliefs, goals, and perspectives are also a key part of curriculum planning. When educators consider and include families' wishes for their children's care and education, the curriculum becomes more meaningful and inclusive. This collaborative approach strengthens the connection between home and school and reinforces children's sense of identity and belonging.

You will explore curriculum planning and evaluation in greater depth in Chapter 7, where strategies and tools for developing responsive, developmentally appropriate learning experiences are discussed further.

Keeping Records

Recordkeeping is a vital aspect of any ECE program. Records provide documentation of children's growth, development, and learning experiences, allowing for effective communication with families, informing curriculum planning, and ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements. The type and variety of records vary based on the program.

There are several factors that drive recordkeeping. These factors are as follows:

- **Philosophy of the School:** Records guide planning and may be shared with families.
- **Educator Training Process:** Documentation is required for continuing education as supporting evidence of their competency as educators.
- **Accreditation Process:** This could include documentation of educator effectiveness, usage of space, parent involvement, philosophy of the school and curriculum, and management of the center or school.
- **Commitment to Developmentally Appropriate Practice:** Anecdotal records, developmental checklists, and portfolios provide insight and information to meet the developmental and individual needs of the children.
- **Family Communication:** Observations are recorded or noted and shared with families.
- **Developing Curriculum:** Data collected from classroom observations are used in the emergent curriculum planning process.

Attending Meetings

Communicating with colleagues and families is part of the early childhood educator's responsibilities. Meetings could include staff meetings, family–educator conferences, family education meetings, professional meetings, or home visits.

Communicating With Families

Talking to a parent at the beginning or end of the day, sending an email, or calling a parent to share information is a regular part of the early educators day. Correspondence may have a specific action needed, such

as a phone call to inform that a child is sick and needs to be picked up, or a quick celebration email to share the excitement of a developmental milestone being met.

Effective communication also involves listening and learning from families. Each family brings its own unique culture, values, and beliefs about child-rearing and education. Early childhood educators should strive to understand and respect these perspectives, incorporating them into the child's care and learning experience whenever possible. This helps build trust, strengthens the connection between the program and the home, and ensures that families feel seen, valued, and supported as partners in their child's development.

The roles and responsibilities of early childhood educators are diverse, dynamic, and deeply rooted in the goal of nurturing the whole child. Whether building relationships, managing classrooms, planning responsive curriculum, maintaining records, or partnering with families, educators wear many hats—all in service of supporting each child's growth, development, and sense of belonging. These responsibilities require intentionality, reflection, and a commitment to ongoing learning. By understanding and embracing the many facets of their role, early childhood professionals lay the foundation for meaningful learning experiences that extend far beyond the classroom.

6.4 PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIORS

Alongside their daily responsibilities, early childhood educators are expected to demonstrate professional behaviors and uphold high standards. These behaviors reflect the field's values and support strong outcomes for children and families. Infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age early educators play an important role in the lives of children and their families that they encounter. These interactions leave lasting

impressions. Children's development takes place over time, and each experience affects the course of who they become. Development is strengthened when children engage in meaningful interactions with adults who are committed to high-quality professional principles.

As an individual working with children and families, many activities require educators to maintain high-quality professional standards. Below are some of the experiences educators participate in during daily professional life:

- Interacting with children and youth
- Engaging with family members
- Interacting with supervisors and managers
- Collaborating with fellow staff members
- Interacting with community partners

Establishing and maintaining high-quality professional standards are important to every responsibility each day. The process evolves as new situations are encountered.



Figure 6b: Educator talking with infant and mother.

Early childhood educators possess a unique blend of personal and professional qualities that contribute to their effectiveness. These attributes enable them to create supportive, nurturing, and stimulating learning environments for young children.

Key Attributes:

- **Respect for Children:** Recognizing and valuing each child as an individual and respecting their unique personalities, interests, and learning styles

- **Positive Relationships:** Building strong and positive relationships with children, families, colleagues, and community members

- **Effective Communication:** Communicating clearly and effectively with children, families, and colleagues using age-appropriate language and active listening skills (e.g., eye contact, nodding, paraphrasing)

- **Attitudes and Biases:** Understanding and appreciating the diversity of children and families' backgrounds and cultures, which creates an inclusive and equitable learning environment

- **Continuous Learning:** Engaging in ongoing professional development to improve knowledge and skills and staying up to date with best practices in early childhood education

- **Ethical Conduct:** Adhering to ethical standards and codes of conduct, maintaining confidentiality, and acting with integrity

- **Safety and Well-Being:** Prioritizing children's safety and well-being and creating a secure and healthy learning environment

- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Being open to new ideas and approaches, adapting to changing circumstances, and responding to children's individual needs

- **Creativity and Imagination:** Using creativity and imagination to develop engaging and stimulating learning experiences

- **Patience and Understanding:** Showing patience and understanding when working with young children, recognizing their developmental stages and providing appropriate support

- **Enthusiasm and Passion:** Having a genuine love for children and early childhood education, exhibiting enthusiasm and passion for their work

- **Organization and Time Management:** Effectively planning and organizing activities, managing time efficiently, and prioritizing tasks
- **Cultural Competence:** Possessing knowledge and skills to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds
- **Problem-Solving:** Being able to identify and solve problems creatively and effectively
- **Strong Work Ethic:** Demonstrating a strong work ethic, being reliable, and taking initiative
- **Self-Awareness:** Continuous reflection of attitudes, habits, and actions to evaluate strengths and limitations

These personal and professional attributes are essential for early childhood educators to create high-quality learning experiences that support children's growth, development, and lifelong learning (Google, 2024).

A Developmental Perspective

Developing professionalism is a vital part of being an effective early childhood educator. As educators build their professional identity, they strengthen their ability to advocate for children and families, collaborate with others, and uphold the standards of high-quality early care and education. Fostering professionalism ensures that educators approach their work with intention, integrity, and a deep respect for the children in their care. Dr. Lilian Katz (2015) identifies four developmental stages of professionalism in Table 6b. As you review each of these stages, consider where you might be on your own professionalism journey.

Table 6b

States of Professionalism	
Stage	**Description**
Stage I: Survival	This stage generally refers to the first year or two of teaching, when an educator's primary concern is "surviving" in their role engaging with children and families. During this time, educators need support, guidance, and encouragement.
Stage II: Consolidation	With the completion of their initial years of teaching, educators come to see themselves as capable of managing their day-to-day responsibilities. Ongoing training and support on site continue to be significant for their growth.
Stage III: Renewal	During this stage, teachers become interested in new developments in the field. They may benefit from joining professional organizations and participating in various professional development experiences such as conferences or other professional meetings.
Stage IV: Maturity	It may take a few years after beginning to work with children and families for an educator to reach maturity. During this time educators feel confident about their own competence and begin to ask more complex questions about their practice. At this stage they also continue to benefit from participating in conferences or seminars, ongoing education or training, reading professional literature, and engaging with other educators.

Additional Resource

Nurturing Your Sense of Professionalism From The Virtual Lab School

- Review the sections:

- "Experiences and Resources for Professional Growth"
- "Considering Your Own Wellness"

Burnout in Early Childhood Education

Burnout is a significant issue in ECE, with numerous studies highlighting the high rates of stress and exhaustion experienced by educators in this field. This phenomenon can have detrimental effects on both educators' well-being and the quality of care provided to children.

Causes of Burnout

- **High Workload:** Early childhood educators often face heavy workloads, including lesson planning, classroom management, administrative tasks, and parent communication.
- **Long Hours:** Many childcare providers open early and stay open late for working parents.
- **Lack of Support:** Inadequate support from administrators, colleagues, or families can contribute to feelings of isolation and stress.
- **Low Pay:** Low salaries and limited opportunities for advancement can lead to job dissatisfaction and burnout.
- **High Expectations:** Increasing emphasis on standardized testing and accountability can create unrealistic expectations and pressure on early childhood educators.
- **Emotional Demands:** Working with young children can be emotionally demanding, as educators must often deal with challenging behaviors, family crises, and other stressors.

Impacts of Burnout

- **Decreased Job Satisfaction:** Burnout can result in feeling unfulfilled at work and a diminished sense of purpose or enthusiasm.
- **Increased Absenteeism and Turnover:** Educators who are experiencing burnout may be more likely to take sick leave or leave the profession altogether.
- **Negative Impact on Children:** Burnout can make it challenging to provide high-quality care and support to children.
- **Increased Stress and Health Problems:** Burnout can contribute to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and other health problems.

Addressing Burnout

Employers can help address educators' burnout through the following tactics:

- **Support and Professional Development:** Provide educators with adequate support, professional development opportunities, and opportunities for collaboration.
- **Workload Management:** Implement strategies to help manage workload and reduce stress.
- **Improved Compensation and Benefits:** Increase salaries and competitive benefits.
- **Positive Work Culture:** Create a positive and supportive work culture to help to foster a sense of community and belonging.
- **Self-Care:** Encourage activities that promote well-being (physical activity, mindfulness, hobbies, etc.).
- **Work–Life Balance:** Promote realistic schedules, flexible work arrangements, and respect for personal time.



Figure 6c: Educator practicing self-care.

Signs of burnout include exhaustion, anxiety and depression, feelings of isolation, inability to cope with the demands or pressures of the job, and lack of joy. By addressing the underlying causes of burnout and providing support and resources, we can help to create a more sustainable and fulfilling profession for early childhood educators (Google, 2024). Professional behaviors are deeply connected to ethical practice. Educators make daily decisions that require thoughtful reflection and a strong ethical foundation. The next section focuses on the ethical responsibilities that guide this work.

Reflect

1. What are the most important professional attributes that today's early childhood professional should possess? What are the most important personal attributes?
2. What are the signs of teacher burnout? What are some steps you can take to prevent yourself from burnout?

6.5 ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

> *"Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny." (Quote commonly attributed to Mahatma Gandhi)*

Moral guidelines by which we govern our behavior are known as ethics. A code of ethics provides a collaborative base of wisdom and advice gathered to help professionals navigate common issues. Ethics is at the heart of everything educators do. Most decisions require an aspect of ethical decision making such as planning curriculum, communicating with families, or planning a daily schedule. Ethical behaviors and actions reflect what educators bring to your work with young children and their families in the form of morals and values.

Key Elements of the NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed a comprehensive set of professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators. These standards outline the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that educators need to provide high-quality care and education for young children. They are the commitments all early childhood educators should hold true. It protects educators and administrators from having to navigate difficult ethical decisions in the moment with the possibility of personal bias. It supports decision making and actions. There are four sections in the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct:

1. Ethical responsibilities to children
2. Ethical responsibilities to families

3. Ethical responsibilities to colleagues
4. Ethical responsibilities to community and society

Table 6c identifies some key elements of the NAEYC professional standards and competencies PDF:

Table 6c (NAEYC, 2011)

Key Elements of the NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies	
Element	**Description**
Knowledge	• **Child Development:** Understanding of child development, including physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth • **Curriculum:** Knowledge of early childhood curriculum, including developmentally appropriate practices and culturally responsive pedagogy • **Assessment:** Ability to use various assessment methods to monitor children's progress and inform instruction • **Family Engagement:** Understanding the importance of family engagement and effective communication strategies • **Professional Ethics:** Knowledge of ethical principles and standards in early childhood education • **Safety and Health:** Understanding of safety and health regulations and practices in early childhood settings
Skills	• **Teaching and Learning:** Ability to plan, implement, and evaluate effective teaching strategies for young children • **Communication:** Effective communication skills with children, families, colleagues, and community members • **Observation and Assessment:** Ability to observe children, document their progress, and use data to inform instruction • **Professional Development:** Commitment to ongoing professional development and learning • **Problem-Solving:** Ability to identify and solve problems related to early childhood education

Dispositions	• **Respect:** Respect for children, families, and colleagues • **Commitment:** Commitment to providing high-quality early childhood education • **Professionalism:** Adherence to ethical standards and professional conduct • **Flexibility:** Adaptability to changing circumstances and individual needs • **Collaboration:** Ability to work effectively with others, including colleagues, families, and community members

Additional Resources

This is an additional lesson about responsibility and ethics when working with children, families, and coworkers (The Virtual Lab, 2023):

- Professionalism: Ethical Practices from The Virtual Lab School

NAEYC also developed a Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators that aligns with the Professional Standards and Competencies outlined above (2011).

- NAEYC Code of Ethics

By adhering to these standards and competencies, early childhood educators can ensure that they are providing the best possible care and education for young children.

Reflect

1. Why are professional standards for teaching preparation AND the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct important for the field of early childhood education?
2. What are some ways to practice being an ethical staff member?
3. What are some practices to keep in mind when it comes to setting limits and professional boundaries between families and direct caregivers?

6.6 ADVOCACY

Just as ethics guide decisions in the classroom, advocacy empowers educators to extend their impact beyond the program walls. Advocacy plays a critical role in shaping policies and practices that support children, families, and the profession. Advocacy in ECE is the act of supporting, speaking up for, or taking action on behalf of a cause, policy, group, or individual to bring about change or raise awareness. In ECE, advocacy often involves promoting the well-being, rights, and needs of young children, families, and educators—whether by influencing policy, securing resources, or educating others about the importance of high-quality early care and education. It is a crucial component in ensuring that young children have access to high-quality learning experiences that support their development and future success. By advocating for policies,

programs, and resources that prioritize ECE, individuals and organizations can make a significant difference in the lives of children and families.

Importance of Advocacy

Advocating for early childhood education is essential to ensure that all children have access to high-quality experiences that support their development and long-term success. Key reasons for advocacy include:

- **Brain Development:** The early years of a child's life are critical for brain development. Quality ECE can help children build strong cognitive, social, and emotional foundations.
- **Educational Equity:** Access to ECE can help close the achievement gap and provide all children with equal opportunities to succeed.
- **Economic Benefits:** Investing in ECE has long-term economic benefits, as it can lead to increased workforce participation, reduced crime rates, and improved overall well-being.

Key Areas of Advocacy

Effective advocacy in ECE focuses on several critical areas that directly impact the quality and accessibility of programs for young children and their families. These key areas include:

- **Funding:** Advocating for increased funding for ECE programs is essential to ensure that all children have access to high-quality care.
- **Quality Standards:** Promoting the development and implementation of rigorous quality standards can help ensure that early childhood programs are meeting the needs of children and families.
- **Professional Development:** Supporting ongoing professional development for early childhood educators is crucial to enhancing their skills and knowledge.
- **Family Engagement:** Advocating for policies and practices that promote family engagement can help create a supportive

environment for children's learning.
- **Access and Equity:** Ensuring that all children, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status, have access to high-quality ECE is a key priority.

Becoming an Advocate

Taking an active role in advocacy begins with a commitment to staying informed, building meaningful connections, and using your voice to drive positive change in ECE. Key steps include:

- **Staying Informed:** Keep up to date on current research, policies, and trends in ECE.
- **Building Relationships:** Connect with other advocates, policymakers, and community leaders.
- **Telling Your Story:** Share personal stories about the impact of ECE on children and families.
- **Advocating for Change:** Contact your elected officials, participate in community events, vote, and support organizations working to improve ECE (Google, 2024).

Additional Resource

- Find your elected officials here: https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/My-Elected-Officials
- Read *Advocacy. Leadership in Early Care and Education* (Marino et al., 2022): https://pressbooks.nscc.ca/eceleadership/chapter/advocacy-embracing-the-work-you-are-already-doing-

and-taking-it-further/

By advocating for ECE, professionals contribute to creating a brighter future for children and their families. Collectively, society can work toward ensuring that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Early childhood educators hold a powerful role in shaping the lives of young children and supporting their families. They possess a deep understanding of the challenges many families face, the daily struggles that impact children's success, and the ways in which policy decisions can either support or hinder progress. As experts in the field, their insights, experiences, and ideas are essential to driving meaningful change.



Figure 6d: Educators advocating.

Reflect

1. What are some ways you can be an advocate for children and families?
2. Connect something you read in the chapter to your own experiences working with children and families.

6.7 PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES

Advocacy and ethical practice are both supported by a strong framework of professional competencies. Wisconsin's commitment to professionalism in the early childhood field is reflected in the Wisconsin Core Competencies For Professionals Working with Young Children & Their Families PDF (Ramminger, 2014). This comprehensive framework outlines the essential areas of expertise needed to support the holistic development of young children. The "Professionalism" section of the framework highlights key expectations related to ethical practice, reflective teaching, advocacy, collaboration, and lifelong learning. These competencies are grounded in research and informed by the standards and recommended practices of respected national professional organizations. Together, they promote a shared understanding of what it means to be a professional in ECE and help guide educators toward excellence in their field.

Reflect

1. Which competency area feels the most familiar to you, and why?
2. What is one new idea or responsibility you noticed that early child educators are expected to know or do?
3. How do you think these competencies can help guide you as you work with young children and families?

6.8 CONCLUSION

Professional behaviors are essential for early childhood educators to create a positive and effective learning environment. These behaviors reflect the educator's commitment to ethical standards, respect for children and families, and continuous professional development. By demonstrating these professional behaviors, educators can create a nurturing and supportive environment that promotes children's growth and development.

6.9 LEARNING ACTIVITIES



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=94#h5p-14



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=94#h5p-15

6.10 REFERENCES

Google. (2024). *Gemini Ai.* (October 2024 version) [Large language model]. https://gemini.google.com/

Katz, L. G. (2015). *The developmental stages of teachers*. Early Childhood and Parenting (ECAP) Collaborative. https://www.mentoringsc.com/uploads/1/7/6/8/17684955/developmental_stages_of_teachers_article_m1_s1.pdf

Marino, T., Rosengarden, M., Gunyon, S., & Noland, T. (2022). *Advocacy. Leadership in early care and education*. https://pressbooks.nscc.ca/

eceleadership/chapter/advocacy-embracing-the-work-you-are-already-doing-and-taking-it-further/

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2011). *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment* [PDF]. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Ethics%20Position%20Statement2011_09202013update.pdf

Virtual Lab School. (2023). *Professionalism*. https://www.virtuallabschool.org/tcs/professionalism

Ramminger, A. (Ed.). (2014). *Wisconsin core competencies: For professionals working with young children*. Wisconsin Registry. https://wiregistry.org/wp-content/uploads/wi_ec_core_competencies_2014.pdf

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2023). *Wisconsin Administrative Code: DCF 251* [PDF]. https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/files/publications/pdf/205.pdf

Images:

Figure 6a: Aitubo. (2025). *Flux* (v1.0). [Artificial intelligence system]. https://aitubo.ai/

Figure 6b: OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT. (April 28 version) [Large language model]. https://chatgpt.com/

Figure 6c: "woman-8064226_1280" by mooremeditation, via Pixabay is licensed under CC0

Figure 6d: OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT. (April 28 version) [Large language model]. https://chatgpt.com/

Chapter 7: Exploring Early Childhood Curriculum Models: Approaches to Supporting Young Learners

CHRISTINE SPANG, MSED

Course Competency: *Explore early childhood curriculum models*

Learning Objectives:

- Describe the definition and purpose of play-based curriculum in early childhood education
- Identify play-based curriculum models
- Identify the philosophies, theorists, and the educator's role in research-based curriculum models

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) teaching approaches and curriculum models provide a framework for teaching young children. They guide educators in intentionally designing indoor and outdoor environments by selecting appropriate activities, materials, and teaching methods to support children's development and learning. By providing a structured approach, aligning with child development, and guiding teaching

practices, curriculum models can help ensure that children receive a high-quality education that prepares them for future success.

This chapter will review the Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Waldorf teaching approaches. It will also explore two of the most common curricula in ECE, HighScope and Creative Curriculum. Many curriculum models are based on similar approaches, or the same fundamental beliefs, values, and principles that guide our teaching.

7.2 CURRICULUM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Curriculum in ECE refers to the planned and spontaneous experiences, interactions, and environments that support children's learning and development. It encompasses a wide range of teaching practices, materials, and strategies designed to foster cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.

Emergent Curriculum

Emergent curriculum in ECE is an approach where the curriculum evolves based on the interests, questions, and needs of the children, rather than being strictly preplanned or rigid. It is defined by its responsiveness to the children's ideas and curiosities, with educators acting as facilitators of learning rather than directors. In this approach, curriculum is seen as everything the educator does, from the way they engage with children to how they design and manage the learning environment (Wien & Williams, 2008). The environment itself is carefully crafted to invite exploration, creativity, and problem-solving, with materials and spaces that encourage independent and collaborative learning (Beneke et al., 2019). Following the child's lead is central to this

philosophy, as it allows for learning to be deeply connected to the child's interests and real-life experiences. Additionally, the culture of the classroom plays a significant role in emergent curriculum, as it fosters a community where relationships, respect, and cultural values shape how learning unfolds. This approach ensures that every aspect of the curriculum—whether planned or spontaneous—supports children's holistic development and honors their agency as active learners.

Here are some of the key benefits of an emergent curriculum:

- **Increases Engagement and Motivation:** When children are exploring topics they are genuinely interested in, their motivation to learn skyrockets. This leads to deeper engagement, sustained attention, and a more profound understanding of concepts.
- **Fosters a Love of Learning:** By capitalizing on children's innate curiosity and allowing them to take ownership of their learning, emergent curriculum cultivates a lifelong love for learning.
- **Supports Individual Strengths and Needs:** Emergent curriculum recognizes that every child is unique with their own learning styles, strengths, and developmental paces. It allows educators to tailor activities and provide personalized learning paths, ensuring that all children can thrive.
- **Promotes Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving:** Children are encouraged to ask questions, investigate, experiment, and find solutions to problems that arise from their own inquiries. This fosters critical thinking, creativity, and decision-making skills.
- **Enhances Social and Emotional Development:** Emergent curriculum often involves collaborative projects and interactions, promoting essential social skills like communication, sharing, negotiation, and empathy. It also builds self-confidence, autonomy, and a sense of belonging as children feel valued and heard.
- **Creates Meaningful and Relevant Learning:** By connecting learning to children's real-life experiences, interests, and home lives, the curriculum becomes more meaningful and relatable. This helps

children see the relevance of their activities and connect new knowledge to their existing understanding.

- **Encourages Creativity and Exploration:** The flexible nature of emergent curriculum provides ample opportunities for hands-on exploration, experimentation, and creative expression. Children are encouraged to think outside the box and develop new ideas.
- **Inclusive and Diverse:** Emergent curriculum embraces and celebrates the diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences of all children. By incorporating these into the curriculum, it creates an inclusive environment where every child feels seen and valued.
- **Empowers Children:** Giving children a voice in their education fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning journey, leading to greater self-direction and independence.
- **Dynamic and Responsive:** The curriculum is constantly evolving based on the children's interests and developmental progress, making it a highly dynamic and responsive learning environment.

In essence, an emergent curriculum moves away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach to education and instead creates a dynamic, engaging, and personalized learning experience that is deeply rooted in the child's natural curiosity and interests

Play-Based Curriculum

Play is an integral aspect of childhood, offering numerous benefits for cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical development. A play-based curriculum in ECE takes advantage of this natural disposition to put play and activity at the center of children's learning.



Figure 7a: Children playing with a variety of open-ended materials.

Table 7a

Key Benefits of Play-Based Curriculum	
Domain of Development	**Key Benefits to Children and Examples**
Physical Development	• **Gross Motor Skills:** Active play such as crawling across a soft mat, cruising along furniture, or running across the playground all build coordination, strength and balance. • **Fine Motor Skills:** Picking up finger foods, stacking cups, stringing beads, or cutting with scissors refines small muscle movements and hand-eye coordination.
Social-Emotional Development	• **Cooperation:** Playing alongside other children and handing them a block or working together to build something develops early social skills and teamwork. • **Self-Esteem:** Smiling and clapping after placing a shape in a sorter or completing a challenging art project or puzzle fosters a sense of accomplishment and confidence. • **Empathy:** Offering a stuffed animal to a crying peer or role-playing care during dramatic play support emotional understanding and connection.
Language Development	• **Language Skills:** Responding to a caregiver's voice with babbles, naming familiar objects, or creating stories promote receptive and expressive language development.

Approaches to Learning	• **Imagination:** Pretending a spoon is a phone or a cardboard box is a rocket ship shows symbolic thinking and creativity. • **Motivation:** Trying again and again to stack a tower or returning to a long-term project like a block model shows perseverance and motivation to learn.
Cognitive Development	• **Problem-Solving:** Figuring out how to open a container, completing a shape sorter, or trying a new strategy in a board game supports critical thinking and reasoning skills.

A play-based curriculum is an essential approach in ECE that uses play as the primary method for fostering learning and development (Fisher et al, 2012). Through guided and unstructured play experiences, children explore their interests, develop social skills, and engage in problem-solving while building cognitive, emotional, and physical competencies (Vaughan & Brown, 2009). Table 7b outlines elements of a play-based curriculum.

Table 7b

Elements of Play-Based Curriculum	
Element	**Description**
Open-Ended Materials	Play is unstructured with no specific learning objective. Provide a variety of materials that can be played with and used in multiple ways with no definite end. This can include loose parts such as buttons, fabric scraps, and cardboard tubes. They help to encourage creativity, exploration, and language development.
Child-Directed Play	Play is self-chosen. Children choose to participate in experiences based on their own interests and desires. Allow children to explore and learn at their own pace.
Process-Orientated	Classroom experiences prioritize the journey of learning over the final product. In a play-based curriculum, the emphasis is placed on the exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving that occur along the way.

By prioritizing play-based learning, early childhood educators can create a stimulating and supportive environment that lays a strong foundation for children's lifelong learning and development.

Nature-Based Curriculum

A nature-based curriculum is an approach to ECE that emphasizes learning through regular and meaningful experiences in natural environments. Rooted in the belief that nature is a powerful teacher, this model supports the development of the whole child by encouraging exploration, curiosity, risk-taking, and connection with the natural world.



Figure 7b: Children exploring in nature.

Nature-based education integrates the natural environment as both the setting and source of curriculum. Rather than separating "outdoor time" from academic learning, this approach treats nature as a living classroom where children engage in play and discovery. Learning is often emergent—driven by children's questions and interests—and deeply rooted in hands-on, sensory experiences.

Curriculum supported by nature aligns with a constructivist philosophy, where children build knowledge through active exploration. It also aligns with the principles of developmentally appropriate practice, emphasizing experiential, child-led learning that reflects children's developmental stages and interests.

There are five core elements of the nature-based approach:

- **Outdoor Learning Environments:** Natural spaces such as forests, meadows, gardens, or even schoolyards are central. These areas

provide open-ended materials (e.g., sticks, rocks, leaves, mud) that support creativity, problem-solving, and physical development.

- **Unstructured Play:** Children are encouraged to climb, build, dig, observe, and play freely in natural spaces, promoting motor development, resilience, and collaboration.
- **Inquiry and Observation:** Nature offers countless opportunities for inquiry. Children might observe life cycles, weather patterns, or animal behavior—sparking scientific thinking and environmental awareness.
- **Risk-Taking and Confidence:** Nature-based settings allow for manageable risks (like balancing on logs or navigating uneven terrain), which help children develop confidence, self-regulation, and persistence.
- **Connection to Place and Sustainability:** Regular time in nature fosters a deep emotional bond with the environment, laying the foundation for environmental stewardship and a lifelong respect for the natural world.

Additional Resources

- WI Department of Education Play is the Way YouTube Video
- Children & Nature Network
- Exploring the Emergent Curriculum

Reflect

1. In your own words, define “emergent curriculum.”
2. What are the most compelling arguments that a play-based curriculum is the foundation for learning?
3. How does a nature-based curriculum promote child development and learning in all domains?

7.3 APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM

Curriculum approaches such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf offer distinct yet complementary philosophies that have shaped ECE worldwide. Each approach emphasizes the importance of nurturing the whole child—socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically—through developmentally appropriate, child-centered learning experiences. The Montessori method, developed by Dr. Maria Montessori, is grounded in scientific observation and emphasizes independence, hands-on learning, and self-discipline. The Reggio Emilia approach, inspired by the educational philosophies of Loris Malaguzzi and rooted in post-World War II Italian communities, highlights collaboration, expressive arts, and the environment as the “third teacher” (Edwards, et al., 1998). Waldorf education, founded by Rudolf Steiner, emphasizes imagination, rhythm, and the integration of art, nature, and movement to support the holistic development of the child—intellectually, emotionally, and physically (Childs, 1998). These approaches, each rooted in the theories of child development you learned about in Chapter 2, provide educators with diverse frameworks for creating meaningful, engaging early learning environments.

Montessori

Maria Montessori was an Italian physician and educator. Montessori's early work with children with cognitive disabilities led her to develop a child-centered approach to education that focused on respecting each child's unique abilities and intrinsic desire to learn. In 1907, she opened an early childhood center, the Casa dei Bambini (Children's House), a quality educational environment for children, who many had thought were unable to learn (Mooney, 2002).

The Montessori approach emphasizes independence; freedom within limits; and the development of the whole child, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects. By creating a carefully prepared environment, Montessori educators encourage children to explore, experiment, and learn at their own pace. This approach fosters a love of learning and a sense of independence.

Educators, often referred to as guides, observe rather than instruct, introducing new activities as children demonstrate readiness. This approach values self-education and capitalizes on periods of intense interest, known as sensitive periods, when children are especially receptive to acquiring specific skills.

The curriculum is interdisciplinary and holistic, weaving together practical life skills, sensory refinement, language, mathematics, and cultural exploration. Rather than compartmentalizing subjects, Montessori learning encourages connections between them. For example, children might prepare a snack while developing fine motor skills and sequencing or explore geometric solids while building vocabulary and spatial awareness. Throughout, the materials are designed to move from concrete to abstract understanding, supporting cognitive development in a tangible, meaningful way.

Montessori classrooms often include mixed-age groups, typically spanning 3 years, which fosters peer learning and mentorship. Children progress at their own pace, selecting work that matches their interests and developmental stage. Assessment is ongoing and observational, with

educators documenting growth and using this information to guide future learning opportunities rather than relying on tests or grades.

Ultimately, the Montessori approach to curriculum supports the whole child—socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually—by creating a learning environment that honors choice, encourages curiosity, and nurtures independence.

> "The children are now working as if I did not exist." Maria Montessori (1964)

Additional Resources

There are two different organizations that give accreditation to Montessori schools and educators:

- Visit the website: The American Montessori Society (AMS)
    - Montessori methodology has been adapted to better reflect American culture.
    - Watch: AMS On Demand Videos
- Visit the website: The Association Montessori Internationale (AMI)
    - Original methodology is maintained because the curriculum is the same as conceived by Maria Montessori.
    - Watch: AMI Resource Videos

Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach is a child-centered educational philosophy and pedagogy that originated in the town of Reggio Emilia, Italy, after World War II. The war had devastated the region, and people were eager to rebuild their lives and create a better future for their children. They believed that education, particularly early childhood education, could play a crucial role in shaping a more just and equitable society.

Theorist Loris Malaguzzi, along with parents, educators, and community members, worked together to create schools that were responsive to the needs and interests of children. The approach is rooted in the belief that all children are capable and curious learners and emphasizes the importance of creating a stimulating and supportive environment where children can explore, experiment, and discover.

In Reggio-inspired classrooms, curriculum is not fixed but evolves in response to the children's questions, ideas, and investigations. Educators act as co-learners and collaborators, listening closely to children and using their observations to shape experiences that deepen understanding. Projects often begin with a simple question or event and unfold over days, weeks, or even months, allowing children to explore topics in depth through many forms of expression.

The environment is considered the "third educator," designed to invite exploration and interaction. Natural light, open-ended materials, and displays of children's work reflect the belief that the space should support communication, creativity, and connection. Learning is made visible through careful documentation—educators photograph, transcribe conversations, and display children's thinking processes to reflect, revisit, and plan next steps.

The "Hundred Languages of Children" concept is central to the Reggio Emilia approach and suggests that children have a multitude of ways to express themselves, learn, and understand the world around them (Edwards et al., 1998). These "languages" go beyond just verbal communication and include the following:

- **Artistic Expression:** Drawing, painting, sculpting, and other creative arts, placing a strong emphasis on the arts as a powerful tool for learning
- **Music and Movement:** Singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments
- **Dramatic Play:** Acting out roles and stories
- **Construction and Building:** Creating with blocks, Legos, and other materials
- **Writing and Drawing:** Expressing thoughts and ideas through written language and visual representations
- **Nature Exploration:** Observing and interacting with the natural world
- **Digital Technologies:** Using computers and other digital tools

Overall, the Reggio Emilia approach fosters a dynamic and responsive curriculum that respects the intelligence and creativity of young children, positioning them as active participants in their own learning journey.

Additional Resources

The Reggio Approach was developed by Loris Malaguzzi and parents in the village around Reggio Emilia, Italy; the approach derives its name from the city.

- Review The History and Timeline of the Reggio Emilia Approach
- Watch the YouTube video: What's Pedagogy Anyway? Introduction to Reggio Emilia
- Review The 100 Languages by Loris Malaguzzi
- Watch the Vimeo video: The Superpower of the "Hundred Languages"

Waldorf

The Waldorf approach is inspired by the work of Rudolf Steiner, a philosopher and scientist. His philosophy proposes that children are active agents of their own learning and that they are intrinsically motivated to learn through their own curiosity. Waldorf education is grounded in the belief that education should nurture the whole child—body, mind, and spirit—through a developmental, artistic, and rhythmically structured curriculum. In early childhood settings, the focus is on fostering imagination, sensory experience, and a sense of wonder, rather than on early academics or formal instruction.

Waldorf early childhood classrooms are intentionally home-like and warm, designed to offer consistency, beauty, and simplicity. The daily rhythm follows predictable patterns filled with purposeful work, creative play, storytelling, music, and outdoor exploration. Storytelling in the Waldorf approach is a central, daily practice that nurtures language development, imagination, and emotional connection. These routines provide a strong sense of security and support young children's need for repetition and imitation. Educators model tasks such as baking, handcrafts, or gardening, which children are invited to join through observation and imitation rather than direct instruction (Howard, 2007).

Rather than using structured lessons or academic benchmarks, the Waldorf curriculum immerses children in rich oral language experiences, practical activities, and imaginative play. Fairy tales, seasonal songs, puppet stories, and verse are central tools for developing language and moral understanding. Educators tell rich, oral stories—often drawn from fairy tales, nature, and cultural traditions—without books or visual aids, allowing children to form their own vivid mental images and engage deeply with the narrative. Outdoor play and exploration are essential components of the curriculum, offering children the opportunity to connect with nature and develop physical coordination, sensory awareness, and a sense of responsibility. Regular time spent outdoors fosters creativity, problem-solving, and an appreciation for the natural world, all while supporting healthy physical development. Artistic

expression—through movement, watercolor painting, beeswax modeling, and song—is woven throughout the day, nurturing creativity and fine motor development.

The Waldorf philosophy emphasizes delayed academic instruction, believing that cognitive learning unfolds most effectively after a solid foundation of physical, social, and emotional development. Reading, writing, and math are introduced gradually and organically in the grades, not during the early childhood years. Instead, the emphasis remains on experiential learning, storytelling, rhythm, and meaningful engagement with the natural world (Koetzsch & Riegal, 2018).

Educators in Waldorf settings often stay with the same group of children for several years, building strong, stable relationships. Family involvement is also key, as the approach views the child's development within the context of family, community, and nature. Spirituality, though not religious doctrine, is subtly embedded through reverence for life, celebration of seasonal festivals, and a focus on inner development.

Ultimately, a Waldorf educator's goal is to cultivate well-rounded individuals who are intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually balanced. By combining traditional academic subjects with artistic and practical skills, Waldorf educators strive to create a holistic and enriching learning experience for their students.

Additional Resources

- Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN)
    - Review the article The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education PDF
    - Watch the WECAN Videos

- Watch the Vimeo video: Early Childhood Program – A Healthy and Nurturing Foundation
- Review the article Letting Children Be Children PDF

Table 7c offers a side-by-side comparison of these three approaches, highlighting their core features, classroom environments, roles of the educator, and views on learning and development. This overview provides a foundation for understanding how diverse philosophies can guide early childhood curriculum and influence educational practice.

Table 7c

Comparison of Curriculum Approaches			
	Montessori	**Reggio Emilia**	**Waldorf**
Philosophy	Learning through independence, order, and sensory experiences	Learning through relationships and exploration	Holistic development of head, heart, and hands
Key Features	Self-directed learning, concrete materials, mixed-age groups	Emergent curriculum, project work, expressive "languages"	Rhythmic routines, storytelling, seasonal favorites
Classroom Environment	Ordered, calm, child-sized, materials for self-correction	Rich in natural/ recycled materials, evolving with children's interests	Warm, artistic, home-like with natural toys and calm aesthetics
Educator's Role	Observer, guide, prepares the environment	Co-learner, documenter, facilitator of group inquiry	Model of behavior, storyteller, maintains daily rhythm
View of Learning	Active, hands-on, individual pacing	Collaborative, social, driven by curiosity	Developmental stages, imaginative and experiential
View of the Child	Capable, independent, self-motivated learner	Competent, strong, rich in potential	Spiritual being unfolding over time
Curriculum Structure	Structured around developmental materials and sensitive periods	Emergent, based on child interests and group projects	Thematic, guided by seasonal rhythms and developmental stages
Family Involvement	Encouraged to support at home and school	Deep partnerships, frequent communication, family voice valued	Strong parent–educator communication, shared values emphasized

Reflect

1. Which curriculum approach do you connect with the most? Why? Give three reasons to back up your answer.

7.4 Curriculum Models

Many early childhood programs use purchased curricula to provide structure and guidance for educators while still allowing flexibility to meet individual needs. There are many curricula available, but in this section, we will focus on two widely used models: *HighScope* and *Creative Curriculum*. These curricula are grounded in developmental theory and offer detailed frameworks, goals, and resources to support high-quality teaching and learning. While each curriculum offers a unique perspective, they all aim to support the whole child through developmentally appropriate, play-based experiences that foster curiosity, creativity, and a love of learning. By understanding different play-based curriculum models, educators can create enriching environments that align with children's developmental needs and interests.

HighScope

The HighScope curriculum was developed in 1970, based on the methods of The Perry Preschool Project. This project was a study by American psychologist David Weikart from 1962 to 1967 to track how the intervention of high-quality ECE could positively impact the school readiness of high-risk, low-income, African American children in Michigan (Schweinhart, 2005). Theoretical influences include Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and John Dewey, who were reviewed in Chapter 2.

The HighScope curriculum is a child-centered approach to early education that emphasizes hands-on learning and exploration. It is based

on the belief that all children are capable and competent learners who are curious and motivated to understand the world around them. It places a strong emphasis on social-emotional development, recognizing the importance of relationships, cooperation, and empathy. HighScope integrates different subject areas, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies, so that children see the connections between different concepts and develop a holistic understanding of the world.

Each day, children participate in the plan–do–review cycle (Albro, 2014). They plan their activities, carry out their plans, and reflect on their experiences. This cycle encourages children to take ownership of their learning and develop problem-solving skills.

Five Key Ingredients of HighScope Curriculum

- **Open-Ended Materials:** A child's home, culture, and language are reflected in a variety of developmentally appropriate, open-ended materials for them to explore.
- **Manipulation:** Children make discoveries when they are encouraged to handle, examine, combine, and transform materials and ideas.
- **Choice:** Children choose materials and play partners, change and build on their play ideas, and plan activities according to their interests and needs.
- **Child Language and Thought:** Children communicate verbally and nonverbally, expressing ideas, negotiating roles, and making sense of their experiences through play.
- **Adult Scaffolding:** Educators support and extend children's learning by observing closely, asking open-ended questions, offering just enough assistance to challenge thinking, and building on the child's ideas without taking over the experience.

The HighScope classroom is designed to be an engaging environment that promotes active, experiential learning, and child-initiated exploration. The classroom is divided into various learning centers, each

equipped with a wide range of materials and resources. These centers might include the following (Epstein & Hohmann, 2012):

- Block area for building and constructing
- Art area for creative expression
- Dramatic play area for role-playing and imaginative play
- Sensory table for exploring textures and materials
- Literacy center for reading, writing, and storytelling
- Math and science center for problem-solving and discovery
- Computer center for technology-based learning
- Outdoor play area for physical activity and nature exploration

The classroom provides a variety of open-ended materials that can be used in multiple ways, encouraging creativity and divergent thinking. Materials are organized in a way that is easy for children to access and use independently. Storage solutions are child-sized and clearly labeled.

In a HighScope classroom, educators play a key role in creating a child-centered learning environment. They closely observe and listen to children to understand their interests, strengths, and needs, using this information to plan meaningful, developmentally appropriate activities. Educators support learning by asking open-ended questions, offering guidance when needed, and encouraging independent problem-solving. They organize engaging learning centers and materials that promote exploration and critical thinking. Through ongoing documentation—such as notes and photos—educators track progress and plan individual and group experiences. By taking on these roles, HighScope educators empower children to become confident, active learners and problem-solvers (Albro, 2014).

Additional Resources

- Review Plan-Do-Review in Kindergarten PDF
- Listen to the APM radio documentary: Early Lessons (Hanford & Winter, 2009)
- Read these resources:
    - Early Lessons E-Book PDF
    - The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40 PDF
- Watch this YouTube video: Getting to Know High Scope's Preschool Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum

The Creative Curriculum is a widely used, comprehensive, research-based early childhood curriculum developed by Teaching Strategies. Designed for infants through preschool-age children, it emphasizes developmentally appropriate practice and promotes learning through play, exploration, and hands-on experiences. The curriculum is grounded in the belief that children learn best when they are actively involved in their learning and when educators are intentional in planning meaningful, individualized experiences.

The Creative Curriculum supports deep, meaningful learning through a project-based approach. Project-based learning is a structured form of inquiry, the process of exploring, questioning, and investigating to make meaning and build understanding, in which children explore a topic in depth over time, often through a combination of direct experience, discussion, art, reading, and hands-on investigation. Projects are typically guided by a question or problem and involve sustained engagement. Within The Creative Curriculum, project-based learning often takes the form of "studies." These are intentional, extended investigations of familiar, real-world topics—such as buildings, trees, pets, or wheels—that

unfold over several weeks. For example, children might measure building blocks during a "Building Study," write stories about their pets during a "Pets Study," or draw maps in a "Neighborhood Study."

In The Creative Curriculum classroom, educators create opportunities for inquiry by doing the following:

- Encouraging children to ask questions during daily routines or play
- Providing open-ended materials that invite exploration
- Listening to children's ideas and using them to guide planning
- Asking open-ended questions like, "What do you think will happen if...?" or "Why do you think that works?"

This approach builds critical thinking, language development, and problem-solving skills as children investigate topics that are meaningful to them.

The classroom environment in The Creative Curriculum model is considered the "third educator." Learning spaces are organized into interest areas—such as blocks, dramatic play, art, library, science, and discovery—each thoughtfully designed to invite exploration and reflect children's interests and cultural backgrounds. Materials are developmentally appropriate, open-ended, and rotated based on emerging interests and the projects or studies. A predictable yet flexible daily schedule provides a balance of child-initiated and teacher-guided activities, indoor and outdoor play, and opportunities for individual and group interactions.

Educators play a critical role as observers, planners, facilitators, and assessors. In The Creative Curriculum classroom, educators observe children's play and interactions to gather information about their development, interests, and needs. These observations guide lesson planning, ensuring activities are relevant and engaging. Educators extend learning through intentional interactions—asking open-ended questions, modeling skills, and scaffolding problem-solving. They also build strong

relationships with families to support each child's learning and incorporate the home culture into the classroom community.

Additional Resources

Teaching Strategies (Official Website): https://teachingstrategies.com
Offers detailed information about the curriculum, professional development, and assessment tools such as GOLD®

Reflect

1. After reviewing these curriculum models, what model are you drawn to? Why?

7.5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, early childhood curriculum models serve as essential guides for shaping developmentally appropriate practices that support the growth of the whole child (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2024). By studying a range of models—such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, HighScope, and play-based approaches—educators gain a deeper understanding of the values, theories, and strategies that inform high-quality early learning environments. This knowledge helps early childhood educators make informed, reflective decisions about how to design learning experiences, interact with children, and respond to

developmental needs. It also helps educators form their personal philosophy for teaching with evidence-based practices while honoring the unique cultural, familial, and community contexts of the children they serve. Ultimately, a solid grasp of curriculum models strengthens educators' ability to be intentional, responsive, and inclusive—creating classrooms where all children can thrive, explore, and reach their full potential.

7.6 LEARNING ACTIVITIES

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=99#h5p-12

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=99#h5p-13

7.7 REFERENCES

Albro, C., & Ebert, S. (2014). *Plan-do-review in kindergarten: How one Utah school system makes it work* [PDF]. High/Scope Press. https://highscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/HSwinter2014-15_72_Plan-Do-Review.pdf

Beneke, S., Ostrosky, M., & Katz, L. G. (2019). *The project approach for all learners: A hands-on guide for inclusive early childhood classrooms*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Childs, G. (1998). *Steiner education in theory and practice*. Floris Books.

Edwards, C. P., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. E. (Eds.). (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia Approach-Advanced reflections* (2nd ed.). Ablex Pub. Corp.

Epstein, A. S., & Hohmann, M. (2012). *The HighScope preschool curriculum*. High/Scope Press.

Fisher, K., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Singer, D. G., & Berk, L. (2012). Playing around in school: Implications for learning and educational policy. *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 342-360. https://www.academia.edu/19508688/Playing_Around_in_School_Implications_for_Learning_and_Educational_Policy

Hanford, E., & Winter, C. (Ed). (2009). *American radioworks: Early lessons* [PDF]. American Public Media. https://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/preschool/American_RadioWorks_-_Early_Lessons_-_ebook.pdf

Howard, S. (2007). *The essentials of Waldorf early childhood education* [PDF]. Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America. http://waldorfearlychildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Essentials-of-Waldorf-Early-Childhood-Education.pdf

Koetzsch, R. E., & Riegal, A. (2018). *Letting children be children* [PDF]. Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North

America. http://waldorfearlychildhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Letting-Children-Be-Children.pdf.

Montessori, M. (1964). *The absorbent mind*. Theosophical Press. https://www.daneshnamehicsa.ir/userfiles/files/1/18-%20Maria%20Montessori%20-%20The%20Absorbent%20Mind.pdf

Mooney, C. G. (2002). *Theories of childhood: An introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erickson, Piaget & Vygotsky*. Redleaf Press.

Schweinhart, L. J. (2005). *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through age 40: Summary, conclusions, and frequently asked questions* [PDF]. High/Scope Press. https://highscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/perry-preschool-summary-40.pdf

Wien, C. A., & Williams, L. R. (Eds.). (2008). *Emergent curriculum in the primary classroom: Interpreting the Reggio Emilia approach in schools* (Ser. Early Childhood Education Series). Teachers College Press.

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2024). *Early childhood: Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP)*. https://dpi.wi.gov/early-childhood/devel-approp

Vaughan, C., & Brown, S. (2009). *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. Avery.

Images:

Figure 7a: Google AI. Gemini. (2025). *Flash 2.0* [Artificial intelligence system]. https://gemini.google.com/

Figure 7b: "4121373286_399f964496_k" by woodleywonderwork is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Videos:

Bank Street School for Children. (2022, January 20). *School for children history: Bank Street Centennial* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkzCKvJ9tlQ

Department for Education, South Australia. (2019, October 18). *What's pedagogy anyway? Introduction to Reggio Emilia* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shdMJMwyAj8

Reggio Children. (n.d.). *Il superpotere dei "Cento linguaggi"/The*

Superpower of the "Hundred Languages" | Estratto [Video]. Vimeo. All rights reserved. https://vimeo.com/481355719

Rodrigrap. (2013, July 15). *Getting to know HighScope's preschool curriculum* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7YaobYTPgk

Rudolf Steiner School, NYC. (n.d.). Early Childhood Program – A healthy and nurturing foundation [Video]. Vimeo. All rights reserved. https://vimeo.com/424655462

WisconsinDPI. (2017, April 18). *Play is the way* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbHwOzAO8to

Chapter 8: The Power of Play: Enhancing Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education

SARA HORSTMAN, BS

Course Competency: *Examine the critical role of play as it relates to developmentally appropriate practice*

Learning Objectives:

- Describe the importance of play
- Identify the types and stages of play
- Identify the educator's role in preparing the environment and facilitating play
- Describe how hands-on, play-based experiences promote child development/learning in all domains
- Identify the educator's role in using observational skills to support play and learning

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Play is the foundation of early childhood development, serving as both a natural and essential way for children to explore, learn, and grow. Through play, children develop critical cognitive, social, emotional, and physical

skills that shape their overall well-being. This chapter will explore the importance of play in early childhood education (ECE) and examine the various types and stages of play that support developmentally appropriate practice. Additionally, it will highlight the essential role of educators and caregivers in creating environments that foster meaningful play experiences, using observation to guide and support learning. By understanding how hands-on, play-based experiences promote growth across all developmental domains, educators can ensure that play remains at the heart of early learning.

8.2 IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Children are born observers. From infancy, they watch, listen, and explore their surroundings to make sense of the world. Today's children are not passive recipients of adult knowledge—they are active participants in their own learning. Being an observer not only helps children gather information but also fosters curiosity, initiative, and problem-solving skills. Even the youngest child learns through watching others, experimenting with materials, and drawing conclusions based on what they see and experience.

As you have read previously, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) challenges early childhood professionals to be intentional in how they design environments and engage with children to support meaningful learning. Under the umbrella of DAP, knowledge is constructed through active learning, and discovery is made possible through rich opportunities for exploration. When educators recognize and support children's natural capacity to observe, they empower children to build understanding in a way that is authentic and developmentally meaningful—laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

Play is important. The following are key reasons why play should be incorporated into the curriculum and classroom:

- Inspires imagination
- Facilitates creativity
- Fosters problem-solving
- Promotes development of new skills
- Builds confidence and high levels of self-esteem
- Allows free exploration of the environment
- Fosters learning through hands-on and sensory exploration

It is now recognized that what is often dismissed as “just play” is actually a powerful form of active learning. Through play, children explore the properties of materials and discover how they can be used, changed, or represented. They experiment with different ways of interacting with objects, which helps them develop and refine concepts and ideas. This hands-on exploration of the world—both social and physical—begins at birth and continues to shape their understanding and development.



Figure 8a: Child playing with blocks.

View the following YouTube video from the Wisconsin Department of Education about the importance of play: Play is the Way

Reflect

1. What do you remember about playing as a child?
2. Where was your favorite place to play? People to play with? Items to play with?

8.3 PIAGET'S STAGES OF PLAY AND HOW CHILDREN PLAY

Educators observe stages of play, described in Table 8a, through the experiences children navigate in their program. Drawing from Piaget's theory of cognitive development, these stages of play reflect how children construct knowledge through active exploration and interaction with their environment (California Department of Education, 2016). Educators use these observations to better understand each child's developmental stage, plan environments, set individualized goals, and design meaningful, developmentally appropriate curricular experiences.

Table 8a

Stages of Play	
Stage	**Description**
Functional Play (Birth–2 Years)	Exploring, inspecting, and learning through repetitive physical activity
Symbolic Play (Around 2–7 Years)	The ability to use objects, actions, or ideas to represent other objects, actions, or ideas and may include taking on roles (Picture Perfect Playgrounds, Inc., 2025c)
Constructive Play (Around 2–7 Years)	Involves experimenting with objects to build things; learning things that were previously unknown with hands-on manipulation of materials (Picture Perfect Playgrounds, Inc., 2025a)
Games With Rules (Around 7 Years and Older)	Imposes rules that must be followed by everyone who is playing; the logic and order involved form the foundations for developing game playing strategies (Picture Perfect Playgrounds, Inc., 2025b)

In the world of ECE, there are not only observable stages of play but also types of play done by children 0–8 years old. Mildred Parten (1933), a sociologist and researcher best known for her pioneering work on children's social play, observed 2–5-year-old children and noted six types of play. Three types she labeled as nonsocial (unoccupied, solitary, and onlooker), and three types were categorized as social play (parallel, associative, and cooperative). Table 8b describes each play type. Young children tend to engage in the nonsocial play more than the older children; by age 5, associative and cooperative play are the most common forms of play (Dyer & Moneta, 2006).

Table 8b

Types of Play	
Type	**Description**
Unoccupied Play	Children's behavior seems more random and without a specific goal. This is the least common form of play.
Solitary Play	Children play by themselves, do not interact with others, and do not engage in similar activities as the children around them.
Onlooker Play	Children are observing other children playing. They may comment on the activities and even make suggestions but will not directly join in the play.
Parallel Play	Children play alongside each other, using similar toys, but do not directly interact with each other.
Associative Play	Children will interact with each other and share toys but not work together toward a common goal.
Cooperative Play	Children are interacting to achieve a common goal. Children may take on different tasks to reach that goal.



Figure 8b: Children playing with connecting beads.

Please note that, very much like the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS), the types of play are not age-marked. The ways children play is dependent on them as an individual, their culture, and their environment. This is why it is important to observe and meet the child where they are at in their exploration of play.

Reflect

1. Which stages of play have you observed with children?
2. What events or interactions helped you categorize this

stage?

8.4 FACILITATING PLAY

A facilitator's role is to set the stage (the environment) and then provide both time and opportunities for the children to explore and play. According to Lisa Murphy (2016), trainer and founder of Ooey Gooey, Inc., children and adults have two different definitions of play. Play to an adult has a tangible outcome at the end such as finishing a book or sewing a dress, but to children there is no observable goal or outcome. Being a facilitator of play means that you are ready and willing to assist when called upon. This should not be confused with not doing anything while the children play, during free play. Instead, this means having developmentally appropriate materials readily available for the children to explore their environment. It also means accepting that children will get messy, some of your materials will not clean up as perfectly as they did right out of the box, and the items might be played with in a different way than intended. Children's play thrives when adults step back and relinquish some control. Allowing children more autonomy is key to facilitating authentic play experiences. To foster genuine play, adults need to be willing to let children take the lead.



Figure 8c: Educator setting up environment.

When educators regularly observe and document brief, subtle moments of children's learning through play, those records can help parents and others understand how useful and important play is in helping children to learn and grow. For example, an educator might report the following about a child's language and social development to the parent of a 3-year-old:

> I watched Sarah standing outside the playhouse area today. Instead of just watching the other children or wandering through their play without getting involved as she often does, she brought the children a book to read to the 'baby' in the family. They asked her if she wanted to be the big sister, and she said 'Yes' and joined right in. I have been thinking about ways to help her learn how to use her

> language to get involved in play with other children, but she figured out her own, creative way to join them. (Krieg et al., 2023)

In early childhood settings, the structure and leadership of play experiences vary widely—from open-ended child-led exploration, to more structured, adult-led activities. Each type of play in Table 8c offers unique opportunities for learning. Understanding the differences can help educators make intentional choices that balance guidance with independence (Grounds for Play, 2025).

Table 8c

Types of Play			
Type	**Definition**	**Example**	**Purpose**
Free Play	Unstructured, spontaneous play initiated and controlled by the child without specific goals set by an adult	A child chooses to build a tower with blocks during open center time, with no adult prompting or direction	Supports creativity, independence, decision making, and social interaction
Child-Directed Play	Play that is led by the child's interests and choices but may take place in an environment thoughtfully prepared by an adult	An educator sets up a dramatic play center with dress-up clothes and props, and children choose roles and scenarios on their own	Encourages initiative, problem-solving, and leadership while still offering developmental supports through the materials provided
Adult-Guided Play	Play in which adults participate as partners or facilitators, gently guiding the direction without taking control	During a sensory bin activity, the educator engages with children by asking open-ended questions like, "What does that feel like?" or "Can you find something that makes a sound?"	Expands language, supports deeper thinking, and extends learning while honoring children's lead
Adult-Directed Play	Structured activities planned and led by adults, often with a specific learning goal in mind	An educator leads a small group in a sorting game where children categorize objects by color or shape	Introduces new concepts, reinforces skills, and allows observation of developmental progress

High-quality programs include a balance of these types of play throughout the day. Free and child-directed play promote independence and creativity, while adult-guided and adult-directed activities can scaffold learning and introduce new skills. Games help children practice social rules and regulation in a fun, engaging way.

By intentionally planning for a range of play experiences, educators can meet developmental goals while honoring the natural ways children learn best—through joyful, active exploration.

8.5 THE ROLE OF PLAY IN CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Scenario

Imagine four young children—eager and engaged in play amidst an assortment of wooden blocks. They may appear to be "just playing;" however, upon closer inspection, this moment of play reveals a web of ideas, theories, and hypotheses under construction, as well as an energetic debate. We may observe that the children are negotiating how to connect the blocks to make roads that will surround their carefully balanced block structure. The structure has walls of equal height, which support a flat roof, from which rise ten towers, built using cardboard tubes. Resting on each tube is a shiny, recycled jar lid, each one a different color. Two children are figuring out between themselves when to add or take away blocks in order to make a row of towers that increase in height. As we listen and watch, we witness the children building a foundation for addition and subtraction. To make each wall just high enough to support a flat roof, they count aloud the number of blocks they are using to make each wall,

> showing an emerging understanding of the math concept of cardinal numbers. When they hear the signal that lunch is about to be served, one child finds a clipboard with pen and paper attached, draws a rudimentary outline of the block structure on the paper, and then asks the teacher to write, "Do not mess up. We are still working on our towers."

In this scenario, children show evidence of emerging concepts of social studies through their construction of a small community from blocks; of physical science and mathematics as they experiment with how to make objects balance; and of reading, writing, and drawing as they request the educator's help with making a sign to protect their work. They work together to create their play and cooperate in carrying out agreed-upon plans. Each is fully engaged and manages their behavior to cooperate in a complex social situation. The concepts under construction in the minds of these children and the skills they are learning and practicing closely match several desired learning outcomes for children at this age. Anticipating the variety of concepts and skills that would emerge during the play, the teachers stocked the blocks/construction area with collections of blocks, props, and writing materials to support a full range of possibilities.

Because imaginary play holds such rich potential for promoting children's cognitive, linguistic, social, and physical development, high-quality preschool programs recognize play as a key element of the curriculum. Children's spontaneous play is a window into their ideas and feelings about the world. As such, it is a rich source of ideas for curriculum planning (Lockett, 2004). For example, if an educator observes a group of children repeatedly engaging in imaginary play about illness or hospitalization, they might decide to convert the playhouse area into a veterinary clinic for a week or two. The educator might also read children stories involving doctors, hospitals, getting sick, and getting well. The

educator's observations of children's resulting conversations and activities would suggest ways to deepen or extend the curriculum further. In thinking of ways to extend the curriculum, it will be important that educators ensure that the materials used and themes built upon are culturally familiar to the children and value children's cultural heritage (Learneo, Inc., n.d.).

8.6 THE TEACHING CYCLE

In ECE, the teaching cycle is a continuous, dynamic process that guides intentional and responsive teaching. At the heart of this cycle is assessment, which serves as the foundation for effective planning. By observing and assessing children's development, interests, and learning styles, educators gather valuable insights that inform the next steps in instruction. These observations allow teachers to design meaningful, developmentally appropriate experiences that meet each child where they are. Rather than following a rigid curriculum, the teaching cycle empowers educators to adapt and respond—using assessment not just to monitor progress, but to plan experiences that foster deeper engagement, support individual needs, and promote holistic growth. Through this cycle of "Assess," "Plan," "Implement," and "Reflect," educators create an environment where every child can thrive.

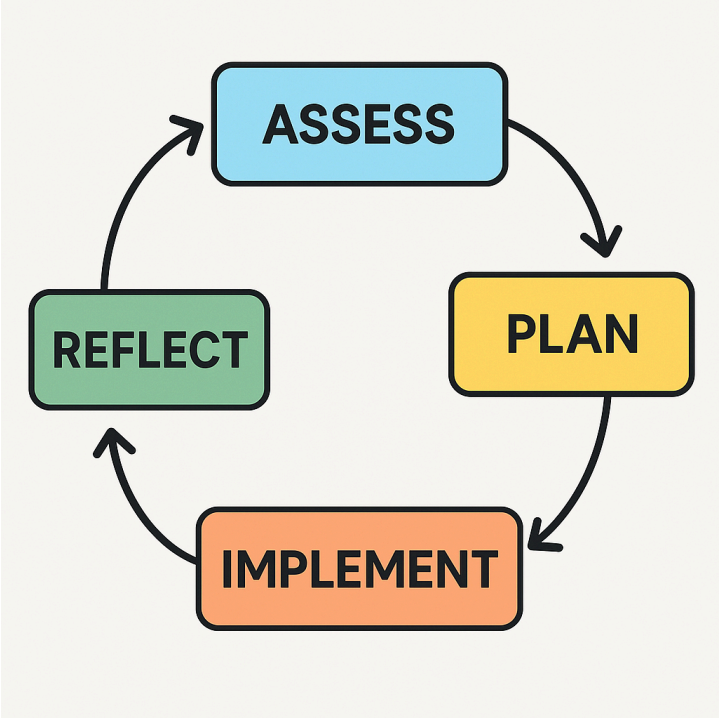


Figure 8d: Teaching cycle.

Assessment in ECE is a systematic process of gathering, interpreting, and using information about children's learning and development to make informed decisions that support their growth. Observation serves as a primary method for collecting meaningful data about children's behaviors, skills, and interactions in natural contexts. Assessment serves multiple purposes. First, it helps educators monitor children's progress toward developmental goals. Second, it helps identify individual learning needs, plan appropriate interventions, evaluate the effectiveness of teaching strategies and curriculum, and communicate progress to families and other professionals. Finally, it also informs decisions about transitions and future learning experiences.

The interconnection between observation and assessment is essential—systematic observation provides the raw data that helps educators identify what children know and can do, how they learn, and how they are progressing developmentally. This intentional approach allows educators to plan responsive and individualized learning experiences rooted in real understanding.

Observation in ECE is the intentional and systematic practice of watching, listening, and documenting children's behaviors, interactions, and learning processes in their natural settings. It involves being fully present and attentive as children engage in play and interact with peers and their environment—without directing or participating in their activities. This kind of mindful presence, whether for a brief moment or a longer period, allows educators to truly see what unfolds in children's play and learning. Through careful observation, educators can better understand each child's unique strengths, interests, and learning styles. It also provides valuable insight into developmental milestones, social-emotional growth, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities. These observations serve as a foundation for responsive curriculum planning, help identify areas where additional support may be needed, and foster meaningful relationships by showing genuine interest in the child's experiences. Additionally, documentation from observations supports communication with families, offering a window into their child's progress and daily life in the classroom.

There are various observation and assessment methods described in Table 8d.

Table 8d

Observation and Assessment Methods	
Method	**Description**
Anecdotal Records	Brief notes describing specific incidents or behaviors
Running Records	Detailed, sequential accounts of everything a child says and does during a specific time
Time Sampling	Observing and recording specific behaviors at predetermined intervals
Event Sampling	Observing and recording every instance of a specific behavior
Checklists and Rating Scales	Using predetermined lists of skills or behaviors to mark presence or frequency
Learning Stories	Narrative observations that focus on a child's learning process, highlighting their strengths and dispositions
Photographs and Videos	Capturing visual evidence of children's learning and development
Work Samples	Collecting children's drawings, writings, and creations to analyze their progress

Early childhood educators see and support children as researchers, investigators, and experts and thus design the play environment to serve the children's inquisitive minds. Educators also provide the materials children need to construct concepts and ideas and master skills in the natural context of play. Children learn from opportunities to discover materials that they may be seeing for the first time and need time to explore and get to know the properties of these materials. It means offering children materials that they can organize into relationships of size, shape, number, function, and time. Children can investigate what happens when they put these materials together or arrange them in new ways, experiencing the delight of discovering possibilities for building with them, transforming them, or using them to represent an experience.

8.7 HANDS-ON LEARNING DEVELOPING IN ALL AREAS

Hands-on learning uniquely allows children to gain knowledge of the topic or idea they are learning through experience.

Dr. Jody Sherman LeVos (2024) states that there are seven benefits to hands-on learning for children of all ages:

1. **Encourages Interaction to Improve Skills:** Learning by doing is a great way to help children practice the skills that they have just learned. The key to hands-on learning is the engagement aspect with the content.
2. **Makes Abstract Concepts Concrete:** When a child commits something to memory, such as counting numbers, it does not necessarily mean that they understand what they are doing or the concept. However, when they physically hold objects they are counting, they begin to understand. By using hands-on learning, children are able to connect what they are learning in the world around them.
3. **Strengthens Fine Motor Skills:** Experiential learning (hands-on learning) encourages children to work on their fine motor skills, also known as the small muscles in your hands and fingers that help perform precise movements. These are movements and skills that will be used into adulthood
4. **Allows for Creativity:** Hands-on learning creates opportunities for children to use all different types of creativity, not just in arts or music but also in their critical thinking skills when finishing a hands-on learning science experiment.
5. **Promotes Problem-Solving Skills:** When children can figure things out on their own and think critically, they are allowing for different perspectives and different approaches to come up with solutions.

Children face challenges when engaging in hands-on activities and can use trial and error to come up with solutions.

6. **Builds Social Skills:** Hands-on experiences often involve group work or collaboration. Children practice communication skills, compromise, and conflict resolution when working hands-on as a group.
7. **Sparks Curiosity:** When working hands-on with materials, children are often inspired to explore and ask questions. Children start to engage with the world around them and become active participants in their learning.

8.8 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, play is not merely a pastime for young children but rather a critical cornerstone of developmentally appropriate practice. It serves as the primary vehicle through which children explore their world; develop essential cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language skills; and build a foundation for future learning. By recognizing and actively fostering child-led, engaging, and meaningful play experiences, educators align with developmentally appropriate principles, creating environments where children thrive, learn authentically, and reach their full potential. Embracing play as a fundamental element of ECE is, therefore, paramount to nurturing well-rounded, curious, and capable young learners.

8.9 LEARNING ACTIVITIES



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=110#h5p-16



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=110#h5p-17



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://wtcs.pressbooks.pub/foundationsofece/?p=110#h5p-19

8.10 REFERENCES

Grounds for Play. (2025). *Cognitive and social types of play*. https://groundsforplay.com/blog/cognitive-and-social-types-of-play

California Department of Education. (2016). *Best practices for planning curriculum for young children* [PDF]. https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/intnatureoflearning2016.pdf

Dyer, J. L., & Moneta, G. (2006). *Play and child development*. Pearson.

Krieg, J., Tewathahá:kwa Maracle, J., & Froats, K. (2023). *Children's learning through play*. Loyalist College. https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/childrenslearningthroughplay/

Learneo, Inc. (n.d.). *Lifespan Development Module 5: Early Childhood – Introduction to Early Childhood*. Course Hero. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/lifespandevelopment2/chapter/module/

LeVos, J. S. (2024). *7 key benefits of hands-on learning (+5 engaging ideas)*. Begin Learning. https://www.beginlearning.com/parent-resources/hands-on-learning/#:~:text=Hands%2Don%20learning%20uniquely%20allows,something%20or%20solve%20a%20problem

Lockett, A. (2004). The c*ontinuous curriculum: Planning for spontaneous play*. Kirklees Children & Young People Service Learning.

Murphy, L. (2016). *Lisa Murphy on play: The foundation of children's learning*. Redleaf Press.

Parten, M. B. (1933). Social play among preschool children. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 28*(3), 136-147.

Picture Perfect Playgrounds, Inc. (2025a). *Constructive play*. Play and Playground Encyclopedia. https://www.pgpedia.com/c/constructive-play

Picture Perfect Playgrounds, Inc. (2025b). *Games and rules*. Play and Playground Encyclopedia. https://www.pgpedia.com/g/games-rules

Picture Perfect Playgrounds, Inc. (2025c). *Symbolic play*. Play and Playground encyclopedia. https://www.pgpedia.com/s/symbolic-play

Images:

Figure 8a: Aitubo. (2025). *Flux* (v1.0). [Artificial intelligence system]. https://aitubo.ai/

Figure 8b: Aitubo. (2025). *Flux* (v1.0). [Artificial intelligence system]. https://aitubo.ai/

Figure 8c: OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT. (April 28 version) [Large language model]. https://chatgpt.com/

Figure 8d: “the teaching cycle” by Nic Ashman, Chippewa Valley Technical College is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

Videos:

Wisconsin. (2017, April 18). *Play is the way* [Video]. YouTube. All rights reserved. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbHwOzAO8to&t=108s