

“What’s right with what we are doing?” Ensuring High-Quality Teaching with Young Children

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Engaging in continuous quality improvement is a collaborative effort. When everyone works together, children and families thrive. While the concepts in this document are focused on children age three to five, it is just as important for infant and toddler teachers to recognize the “big ideas” of learning and the many opportunities to build children’s knowledge and skills.

What is high quality? High-quality refers to the parts of a program that directly advance children’s social and academic outcomes (Fuller et al., 2010). Structural features include size, ratio, teacher training and quality of physical setting as the foundation for teaching. Process features include emotionally supportive interactions, the priority of language, and well-organized opportunities for learning have a direct impact (Mashburn & Pianta, 2013).

Skill building is everything. To be able to design spaces, materials, activities, and supports for children’s success, teachers need to be able to identify and understand:

- Practical skills needed for play, learning, and behavior success including those for self-care, activities, indoor and outdoor routines, and transitions.
- Developmental skills present and emerging for each child.
- Content skills present in play and planned activities with effective strategies to teach and scaffold learning.

The following are skills that contribute to children’s success and examples of content skills.

Approaches to learning

- Dispositions and motivations for relationships and learning
- Executive function and self-regulation skills
- Language/communication, physical, social-emotional, and cognitive processing

Executive function and self-regulation

- **Attention:** Intentional focus
- **Focus:** Filtering inner and outer distractions
- **Memory:** Verbal and non-verbal working memory (holding ideas, words, images in mind)
- **Action:** Purposeful action/refrain from action
- **Emotions:** Emotion regulation

Physical development and health and well-being

- Fine and gross motor skills
- Awareness and knowledge of nutrition, self-management, and safety
- Physical fitness and integration of body systems
- Sensory learning and physical strength
- Eye-hand and body coordination
- Balance and flexibility
- Personal care and hygiene
- Safety, rules, and self-care
- Healthy nutrition and physical habits

Social and emotional development

- **Relationships:** Manage distress, develop healthy attachment, security, empathy, perspective-taking, and resilience
- **Emotion competence:** Recognize, label, and regulate emotions
- **Communication:** Expression of feelings, needs, opinions, desires, cooperate, help, understand and suggest ideas and solutions

Communication, language, and literacy

- **Multi-lingual development:** Linguistic & cultural strengths
- **Communication:** Oral and written, symbols and signs, conventions, words and sentence forms, parts of speech
- **Language play:** Word games, rhyming, patterns, letter sounds, blending and segmenting, phonemic and phonetic awareness
- **Literacy:** Book reading and use books for information
- **Expression:** New vocabulary, retell stories, dictate and caption, use written words as communication

Mathematics

- **Number concepts and language in play and daily life:** One-to-one correspondence, cardinality and sequencing, identifying patterns, comparing shapes, more/less, etc.
- **Attributes of objects and vocabulary:** Color, size, shape, length, and weight (small, big, heavy, light).
- **Spatial skills and position words:** Relationships of objects and self (over, under, up, down, next to).
- **Representing:** Numbers, quantities, data, ideas

Science

- **Thinking processes:** Why, how, and what if questions, predictions; gather, explore, and interpret information
- **Represents data:** Use pictures, graphics, charts, symbols
- **Identifies patterns:** Interact with nature and growing things and take responsibility for the environment
- **Explores cause and effect:** Explore impact of force and simple chemical reactions
- **Uses science tools:** Explore and document the world and learn how things work

Social studies

- **Developing awareness:** Understand self within the context of multiple social identities
- **Exploring community:** Explore similarities and differences
- **Exploring people:** Examine connections in community life including needs, wants, and services
- **Representation:** Use drawings and symbolic pictures of the world, understand change over time, participate in dramatic play and storytelling
- **Democratic participation:** Understand roles, rights, and responsibilities

Visual arts, music, drama, and movement arts

- **Aesthetic engagement:** Variety of forms, mediums, and genres
- **Aesthetic expression:** Creative arts experiences as personal, creative, cultural, and social
- **Aesthetic performance:** Group collaboration and creative projects
- **Uses tools and materials:** Artistic, musical, dramatic, and creative forms

Block play

The goal of block play is for children to build complex structures. Harriet Johnson (Bank Street School, 1920) described seven stages of block play:

- Carrying, stacking, bridge building, creating enclosures, patterns and symmetry, early representational structures, and later complex representational structures.
- Block play increases creativity, problem solving, communication, and collaboration, which are 21st century skills.

Fine motor, logic, and construction

Vocabulary children learn during block play includes:

- Math concept words (e.g., first, second, third..., same, different, less, more, small, large, bigger, smaller, all, none)
- Position words (e.g., above, below, beside, behind, front, back, inside, next to, outside)
- Descriptive words (e.g., open, closed, balance, center, tall, short, bridge)
- Shape words (e.g., square, circle, triangle, cube, cylinder, tube)

Science and technology

- Technology use in daily life
- Tools and materials to create open-ended structures and collections
- Simple machines (ramps, pulleys, gears)
- Ramps and pathways with impact of angles, incline, objects, and weight
- Responsibility in technology tools, information, and equipment use

Questions for reflection

1. What surprises you about the complexity of content knowledge for young children?
2. Do adults understand how much young children can learn and do?
3. What aspects of high-quality do you think matter most in each classroom?

How do teachers scaffold concept learning?

- Describe what teachers and are children are doing.
- Add on information to what children say.
- Ask open ended questions. What can you tell me about___?
- Ask thinking questions. How can you make your building get smaller at the top? How did you solve that? Why do you think that happened?
- Provide props or situations to add complexity to play.
- Create print-rich settings and introduce books for information.
- Model how to use materials.
- Rotate and include increasingly complex materials to match emerging skills.

How do teachers ensure cultural relevance and motivation?

- Ensure high expectations.
- Reflect children's lives in setting, books, and materials.
- Connect learning ideas to children's experiences.
- Boost higher-level thinking with STEM and math play.
- Use sequential activities, such as tangrams, peg-sorting, design cards for construction, jigsaw puzzles.
- Introduce problem solving materials: Legos &Magna-Tiles.
- Connect math and science to community work and careers.
- Incorporate measuring, building, and experimentation.
- Build on children's ideas, questions, and interests.

Reflection questions for program leaders and staff

1. How well do you know each child and family?
2. What are each child's emerging developmental skills?
3. How well do you observe and document what children are learning?
4. How do you capture children's learning through written notes, photographs, videos and samples of children's work?
5. Do you work with families to bring in culturally relevant and meaningful props and experiences for guided play?
6. Have you set purposeful learning goals for materials and activities?
7. How can you enrich more make play more complex?
8. How can you build language skills for each content area?
9. How can you use your setting and materials in more purposeful ways?
10. How can you introduce new ways of exploring concepts in play?
11. Do you identify the executive function and social skills needed for each activity?
12. How do you encourage flexibility, empathy, cooperation, collaboration, and problem solving as children engage with peers?

For more information, see: Workman, S. & Ullrich, R. (2017). *Quality 101: Identifying the core components of a high-quality early childhood program*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress. Read the full report here:

<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2017/02/10063958/QualityEarlyChildhood101-brief.pdf>

For additional resources, see: Marie Masterson, Ph.D. www.mariemasterson.com