

Early Learning Curriculum & Best Practice Considerations

Vision

As young children enter Early Learning classrooms, they will exhibit knowledge and skills across multiple learning domains in a variety of ways. To accommodate this, Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers are accustomed to setting the stage at the beginning of each school year and should always begin by implementing with fidelity, a high-quality curriculum and strong social and emotional learning.

After challenging times, we anticipate children coming in to school with more social challenges and emotional needs. To improve educational and social and emotional outcomes for young children, EC educators must focus on demonstrated SEL, use HQ curriculum to intentionally plan, build thoughtful routines, and construct knowledge by engaging children in a variety of relevant learning experiences, all while being reflective, responsive, and adaptable to the needs of the children and the fluctuating environment ([Trauma Informed Teaching](#)).

At every level, our schools must be prepared to support a child's social and emotional needs, build foundational learning structures, responsive classroom routines and address learning goals for all children.

Specific Considerations

- Play is essential in all early childhood classrooms ([NAEYC Meaningful Play](#)).
- High-Quality ECE curriculum should drive both in-person and distance learning.
- All learning opportunities should be rooted in child development and based on the RIELDS.
- Assessment data should be used to determine how students apply their knowledge and to continuously improve instructional support for students.
- Building relationships is a key factor in creating safe, engaging and responsive early learning classrooms.
- Regular and ongoing communication and collaboration with families is a key component to success in any early childhood setting.
- A variety of engaging instructional and developmental practices should be leveraged to maximize learning potential in each student.

Best Practices

Social and Emotional Learning and Play

Early Childhood classrooms are, for many, the first introduction into education and schools for children. ECE classroom teachers are dedicated to creating welcoming and engaging environments that acknowledge and support

each child's efforts to construct an understanding of the world. Throughout the early childhood years, children have the potential to build a strong social-emotional foundation through the experience of different forms of play. These social and emotional skills are imperative to a child's future relationships, self-esteem, and confidence.

Play is the primary mechanism through which young children develop higher-level thinking skills, enhanced language development, problem-solving capabilities, and empathy toward each other. Having diverse play materials throughout the room will help enrich your environment and stimulate a child's creativity. However, it is important to remember that play is dynamic and may look different based on the setting, the child and the lens with which it is viewed.

Play allows children to create those environments to practice their skills in new, creative, imaginative ways. Play allows children to explore their natural reactions and impulses, experiment with their social skills to see if they're met with positive or negative responses, and find ways of solving their own problems.

As schools embark on the new school year, they must consider ways to prioritize the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of students. If we believe play is a crucial part of learning, we owe it to our students to find a way to incorporate play into all early childhood settings.

Routines

When children are in the classroom, teachers must prioritize creating safe and supportive environments. Establishing predictable routines within ECE classrooms fosters a sense of calm within children as they navigate a new environment. Calm children are better able to focus, regulate their emotions, and begin building relationships. An orderly environment, focusing on safety and nurturing each child's wellbeing will include time for academics, unstructured time for playing and collaboration, small group and independent work, movement, and explorations.

As teachers welcome children back to school it will be important that classroom routines provide a sense of emotional safety and security and maximize learning time. ECE teachers should model rituals that teach, provide opportunities, practice skills, and help students incorporate positive practices into their daily routines that can be translated into an at home environment.

An important consideration for establishing routines is how to build consistent classroom community while planning for necessary events and transitions, such as arrival, meal times, and clean up. It is important that children understand why something is part of the routine, what the expectation is and what their role in the routine is. The best routines have a clear beginning and end, are taught to the children to establish a baseline of understanding, make sense and allow children to participate independently.

For additional information about developing successful classroom routines visit [EC Learning Environments](#) or listen to [CD Routine Podcast](#).

Relationships

Students come from diverse backgrounds, but the one thing they all have in common is the need for a safe learning environment. Building relationships is an integral part of creating a safe early learning classroom. While EC teachers must always take time to cultivate strong relationships, build partnerships, and plan for SEL, COVID-19 has brought with it a greater need for this approach.

Teachers must effectively plan for supportive and equitable learning environments that promote social, emotional, and academic learning for all students, as a child's social skills, emotional state, and sense of value have an impact on

their learning. It is important for classrooms to have a HQ curriculum embedded with building positive relationships into everyday play and learning.

When building relationships is at the center of an early childhood classroom, the quality of student-teacher interactions and academics improves. Teachers lead group discussions, model, and practice building relationship skills such as how to kindly get a friend's attention, how to take turns, how to express feelings, and how to solve conflicts. These opportunities to learn and practice within each day help children connect with others, relieve stress, and support making positive choices ([Teacher Child Relationships](#)).

In an effort to support transitions throughout the year, teachers should seek ways to build relationships that will foster a positive community. Consider how structures used in the classrooms support learning. Think about the pace of lessons, take a few moments to slow down and set the right tone for the class, build in regular check-ins to assess student's engagement and understanding (thumbs up, thumbs down), and think about closing with a reflection activity. Check-ins do not need to be long to be effective but will help establish expectations for how you and your class want to be together as a learning community in class.

For additional information about building and sustaining relationships visit [Reconnecting with Conscious Discipline](#).

Resilience

Resilience develops through supportive relationships, adaptive skills, and positive experiences that are built over time. The teacher's role is to create an atmosphere that supports relationships and uses strong systems of communication in order to guide and support children through problems and strong feelings, and to embed positive strategies into daily practice.

Helping children to develop the ability to recognize and identify their emotions, and manage them appropriately, will strengthen their ability to learn and will help prepare them to work through challenges. Children who function well in the face of adversity do so with the help of positive social interactions, caring relationships, and exposure to supportive interventions. The more we are able to celebrate successes, encourage conversations, and model healthy strategies for managing feelings the more resilient children will become ([Resilience and Conscious Discipline](#)).

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a shared responsibility for all parties to work together to prepare children to succeed in school and life. Much like play, family engagement may look different based on the setting and individuals. What is important is to establish and maintain collaborative, goal-oriented relationships between home and school that will promote children's learning and growth.

Ongoing communication with families and opportunities to share and receive information is essential when working with younger children. Families can often be a great source of information for teachers and share ideas that support the work happening in the classroom. Young children benefit when families are meaningfully and routinely involved in their child's learning.

Family engagement is not one size fits all and can occur within the community, the school and in the classroom. Opportunities for school-family partnerships may vary and depend on family preference, availability, and daily stresses but a true partnership will honor the family's strengths and culture, mutual respect, and shared goals for the child.

Distance Learning

While the expectation is that children will be in-person, at some point children may need to move from one educational setting to another. As students move through in-person and distance learning their ability to predict routines, rely on relationships and continue to develop resilience will play a major factor in their success. When moving to DL, ECE teams should consider a schedule that is more fluid since independent use of technology has obvious limitations for young children. During distance learning, teachers should create fun activities that address both social emotional and academic needs, which should be reflected in classroom schedules.

Teachers should think carefully about how they can create an online space and schedule that closely represents the physical classroom. Encourage students to share something from home, move classroom accessories like bulletin boards and job charts online, celebrate student work, and when possible, circulate and observe student learning. As students become more familiar with the DL routine and expectations, teachers should work to incorporate opportunities for children to spend time online with each other through virtual recess, hangouts, and age-appropriate connections, while also arranging time for individual teacher check-ins.

Remember that teachers set the tone for the classroom, regardless of location, and should be continually aware of their presence. Slowing down, pausing between sentences, smiling, maintaining eye contact, talking in a calm manner, making your face visible, and being mindful of anxiety levels will significantly help students to co-regulate.

In and out of the classroom, ECE teachers must be agile and adaptable, building relationships, modeling skills and expectations, supporting the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of all children, while continually gathering input from students, planned and unplanned learning experiences, and families, and using that information to adjust the environment, their instruction, and educational and SEL supports accordingly.

Resources

Below are additional resources to support teachers and children in preparing for learning.

- SEL
 - [RI SEL Recommendations](#)
 - [SEL Re-Entry Roadmap](#)
- [Rhode Island's Family Fun Activities](#)
- Distance Learning
 - [Creating a Digital Classroom](#)
 - [Digital Media Supports](#)
 - [Virtual Learning Strategies](#)