

**6. Children’s motivation to learn is increased when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency. Curricula and teaching methods build on each child’s assets by connecting their experiences in the school or learning environment to their home and community settings.**

This principle is drawn from the influential report *How People Learn II* and is supported by a growing body of research that affirms principles espoused more than 100 years ago by John Dewey.<sup>51</sup> The sense of belonging requires both physical and psychological safety. Seeing connections with home and community can be a powerful signal for children’s establishing psychological safety; conversely, when there are few signs of connection for children, their psychological safety is jeopardized. It is important for children to see people who look like them across levels of authority, to hear and see their home language in the learning environment, and to have learning experiences that are both culturally and linguistically affirming and responsive.<sup>52</sup>

Equally important is encouraging each child’s sense of agency. Opportunities for agency—that is, the ability to make and act upon choices about what activities one will engage in and how those activities will proceed—must be widely available for all children, not limited as a reward after completing other tasks or only offered to high-achieving students. Ultimately, motivation is a personal decision based on the learner’s determination of meaningfulness, interest, and engagement.<sup>53</sup> Educators can promote children’s agency and help them feel motivated by engaging them in challenging yet achievable tasks that build on their interests and that they recognize as meaningful and purposeful to their lives. Studies have found that some children are denied opportunities to exercise agency because they are mistakenly deemed unable to do so.<sup>54</sup> For educators, supporting a child’s agency can be especially challenging when they do not speak the same language as the child or are not able to understand a child’s attempts to express solutions or preferences. In these cases, nonverbal cues and/or technology-assistive tools may be helpful as the educator also works to address the communication barrier.

As noted earlier regarding brain development, children’s feelings of safety and security are essential for the development of higher-order thinking skills, so fostering that sense of belonging is essentially a brain-building activity. Beginning in infancy, educators who follow children’s lead in noticing their interests and responding with an appropriate action and conversation (including noting when interest wanes) are helping children develop self-confidence and an understanding that their actions make a difference. Educators can involve children in choosing or creating learning experiences that are meaningful to them, helping them establish and achieve

challenging goals, and reflecting on their experiences and their learning. Educators can also intentionally build bridges between children's interests and the subject matter knowledge that will serve as the foundation for learning in later grades.

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

Based on their knowledge of what is meaningful and engaging to each child, educators design the learning environment and its activities to promote subject area knowledge across all content areas as well as across all domains of development. Educators use their knowledge of learning progressions for different subjects, their understanding of common conceptions and misconceptions at different points on the progressions, and their pedagogical knowledge about each subject area to develop learning activities that offer challenging but achievable goals for children that are also meaningful and engaging. These activities will look very different for infants and toddlers than for second- and third-graders and from one community of learners to another, given variations in culture and context. Across all levels and settings, educators can help children observe and, over time, reflect about phenomena in the world around them, gain vocabulary, and build their conceptual understanding of the content of subjects across all disciplines.

Recognizing the value of the academic disciplines, an interdisciplinary approach that considers multiple areas together is typically more meaningful than teaching content areas separately. This requires going beyond superficial connections. It means “making rich connections among domain and subject areas, but allowing each to retain its core conceptual, procedural, and epistemological structures.”<sup>55</sup> It is, therefore, important that educators have a good understanding of the core structures (concepts and language) for all the academic subject areas so that they can communicate them in appropriate ways to children.

Educators shape children's conceptual development through their use of language. For example, labeling objects helps young children form conceptual categories; statements conveyed as generic descriptions about a category are especially salient to young children and, once learned, can be resistant to change.<sup>56</sup> It is also important for educators to monitor their language for potential bias. For example, educators who frequently refer to “boys” and “girls” rather than “children” emphasize binary gender distinctions that exclude some children. Educators can also encourage children's continued exploration and discovery through the words they use. For example, when given an object, children are more likely to engage in creative explorations of that object when they are provided with more open-ended guidance versus when they are given specific information about what the object was designed to do.

From infancy through age 8, proactively building children's conceptual and factual knowledge, including academic vocabulary, is essential because knowledge is the primary driver of comprehension. The more children (and adults) know, the better their listening comprehension and, later, reading comprehension. By building knowledge of the world in early childhood, educators are laying the foundation that is critical for all future learning.<sup>57</sup> All subject matter can be taught in ways that are meaningful and engaging for each child.<sup>58</sup> The notion that young children are not ready for academic subject matter is a misunderstanding of developmentally appropriate practice.

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

Human beings, especially young children, are motivated to understand or do what is just beyond their current understanding or mastery. Drawing upon the strengths and resources each child and family brings, early childhood educators create a rich learning environment that stimulates that motivation and helps to extend each child's current skills, abilities, and interests. They make use of strategies to promote children's undertaking and mastering of new and progressively more advanced challenges. They also recognize the potential for implicit bias to lead to lowered expectations, especially for children of color,<sup>59</sup> and actively work to avoid such bias.

Educators contribute significantly to the child's development by providing the support or assistance that allows the child to succeed at a task that is just beyond their current level of skill or understanding. This includes emotional support as well as strategies such as pointing out salient details or providing other cues that can help children make connections to previous knowledge and experiences.<sup>60</sup> As children make this stretch to a new level in a supportive context, they can go on to use the skill independently and in a variety of contexts, laying the foundation for the next challenge. Provision of such support, or scaffolding, is a key feature of effective teaching. Pairing children can be an effective way to support peer learning in which children with different abilities can scaffold each other.<sup>61</sup>

Children need to feel successful in new tasks a significant proportion of the time to promote their motivation and persistence.<sup>62</sup> Confronted by repeated failure, most children will simply stop trying. Repeated opportunities to practice and consolidate new skills and concepts are also essential for children to reach the threshold of mastery at which they can go on to use this knowledge or skill, applying it in new situations. Play (especially in intentionally designed environments with carefully selected materials) provides young children with opportunities to engage in this type of practice.

Educators foster learning for a group of children by setting challenging, achievable goals for each child, building on the combined funds of knowledge and cultural assets of the children in the group. Providing the right amount and type of scaffolding requires general knowledge of child development and learning, including familiarity with the paths and sequences that children are known to follow in specific skills, concepts, and abilities. Also essential is deep knowledge of each child, based on what the teacher has learned from close observation and from the family about the individual child's interests, skills, and abilities and about practices of importance to

the family. Both sets of knowledge are critical to matching curriculum and teaching experiences to each child's emerging competencies in ways that are challenging but not frustrating.

Encouraging children to reflect on their experiences and learning and to revisit concepts over time is also an important strategy for educators. The curriculum should provide both breadth and depth with multiple opportunities to revisit concepts and experiences, rather than rapidly progressing through a wide but shallow set of experiences. Picture books and other learning materials that depict communities and situations relevant to children's lives can be useful starting points for such reflection. Group projects with documentation, including photos, videos, child artwork and representations, child dictations, and/or children's writing, are also important tools for encouraging reflection and for revisiting concepts over time.<sup>63</sup>

Tiered intervention approaches can be helpful in identifying children who might benefit from additional instruction or support.<sup>64</sup> These approaches, often in collaboration with early childhood special educators and early interventionists, are most effective when they are implemented in a way that is continuous, flexible, dynamic, and focused on the range of critical skills and proficiencies children need to develop and to enable their full participation in the classroom/group community.

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

Young children live in a digital era in which technology and interactive media are pervasive. Given rapid changes in the types and uses of new media, the knowledge base of their effects on children's development and learning continues to grow and shift. Emerging evidence suggests a number of cautions, including concerns about negative associations between excessive screen time and childhood obesity as well as negative impacts on toddlers' performance on measures of fine motor, communication, and social skills.<sup>65</sup> There is no evidence that development is enhanced when children younger than age 2 independently use devices with screen media.<sup>66</sup> Keeping these cautions in mind, technology and interactive media can help to support developmentally appropriate practice. For example, technology and interactive media can facilitate communication between families, children, and teachers. It can also support learning, comprehension, and communication across language differences and provide adaptations that support inclusion of children with disabilities. The use of digital media can facilitate reflection through documentation and formative assessment by children, educators, and families. The use of media can also provide isolated children (for example, children with health problems that prevent them from participating in group settings or those with less well-developed social skills) with opportunities to engage effectively with peers.<sup>67</sup>

Effective uses of technology and media by children are active, hands-on, engaging, and empowering; give children control; provide adaptive scaffolds to help each child progress in skills development at their individual pace; and are used as one of many options to support children's learning. Technology and interactive media should expand children's access to new content and new skills; they should not replace opportunities for real, hands-on experiences.<sup>68</sup> When truly integrated, uses of technology and media become normal and transparent—the child or the educator is focused on the activity or exploration itself, not the technology. Readers are encouraged to review the NAEYC/Fred Rogers Center position statement on the use of technology for more information on this topic.

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View the full list of endnotes.

**Audience:** *Administrator (director or principal), Faculty, Family, Student (higher education), Teacher, Trainer*

**Age:** *Early Primary, Infant/Toddler, Kindergarten, Preschool*

**Topics:** *NAEYC General, Position Statement, Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

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