The Essentials: Supporting Young Children with Disabilities in the Classroom
Written by Pamela Brillante. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2017. ($22)

If your program is new to serving children with disabilities, this is the primer you need. Dr. Pamela Brillante has composed a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of a challenging aspect of early care and education practice.

The book’s first chapters focus on language and the law—and why both matter. Brillante reinforces the need to put people first (as in “Jose who uses hearing aids” rather than “deaf Jose”), the differences in disability and developmental delay, and the tenets of basic children’s rights including the right to protection under the law and the right to be an active member of a community of young learners.

She offers guidance on understanding the history and implications of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the early intervention system for children birth to age 3, and special education services for children ages 3 through 21. Especially useful are charts that describe how programs coordinate with families accessing and receiving services from referral to service reviews and transitions.

Subsequent chapters guide programs and teachers in recognizing the needs for developmentally appropriate practices and universal environmental design—in classroom space, routine, and activities—and individualizing supports and interventions, including those for children with challenging behaviors.

Charts, checklists, and tips are designed to help novice and experienced teachers broaden their understanding of how to maximize support for children with disabilities through access, participation, and progress assessments.

Chapters 6 through 12 address specific disabilities with definitions, possible causes for the disability or delay, impacts on all developmental domains, identification tips, and classroom strategies.

Drawing on her experiences as both a classroom teacher, program specialist, and university instructor, Brillante’s guidance is specific, practical, supportive, and wise. Everyone who works with young children—those with and without developmental and behavioral challenges—will find this an exceptional resource.

Inspirng Young Minds: Scientific Inquiry in the Early Years, Ages 3 – 8
Written by Julie Smart. Redleaf Press, 2017. ($29.95)

Children learn best through hands-on explorations of materials. This, however, does not mean that early care and education environments are simply filled with items that children are left to investigate. Instead, best practice suggests that children are guided in their inquiry by teachers who scaffold their learning. That is, teachers interact with children to build a knowledge base and then slowly, progressively, and creatively assist children as needed to develop a stronger understanding.
In her book, Dr. Julie Smart suggests and justifies an instructional model—4Ex2—that reinforces the reflection and evaluation or assessment functions of the familiar engage, explore, explain, and extend (4E) system. Reflection refers to the meaningful and deliberate consideration of what children want and need to know and how they might best learn it. Assessment is the collection of data on what children are learning. In every phase of a lesson, teachers use reflection and assessment to guide the preparation and presentation of materials, with the varied and singular cycle of engagement, exploration, explanation, and extension.

Smart shares stories of her own classroom experiences with young children to reinforce the 4Ex2 model describing effective practices that invite both physical and natural science explorations. With first-hand examples, she describes encouraging children in simple investigations, asking effective questions, using visual representations, representing data, making investigations safe, gathering resources, modeling positive attitudes, and capturing teachable science moments. In chapter 14, for example, Smart describes what happens when the train derails—how teachers best respond to unexpected challenges, interruptions, and sidetracks.

Numerous appendices offer planning and assessment (including a teacher self-assessment chart) tools, examples, and references round out this accessible and grounded tool for exploring scientific inquiry with young learners.

Boosting Brain Power: 52 Ways to Use What Science Tells Us
Written by Jill Stamm. Gryphon House, 2017. ($12.95)

Arizona State University professor Jill Stamm has encapsulated the essentials of early brain development in an accessible, friendly, and research-rich little book. Each of the 52 topics (one a week for a year?) is formatted to include information on what teachers can do every day to stimulate healthy brain growth in young children.

Conceptually, all of the research-based facets of brain development are covered, each in practical, easy-to-understand-and-share language.

Part 1, Brain Basics 101, covers brain development, structure, timing, and function with diagrams and examples.

Part 2 helps teachers link what science tells about brain development with what they do in their interactions with children.

Part 3 reviews 52 science-based messages, starting with “1. Use it or lose it.” In short, example-rich paragraphs, Stamm describes why the information helps teachers, offers ideas to help teachers implement best classroom practices, and highlights nuggets of brain science (to feature on a family bulletin board?).

For programs that encourage in-service learning for teachers, this tidy (and inexpensive) book is a gem. Consider, for example, tip 25: “Respond rapidly to the needs of infants.” In a learning session, teachers can read and discuss the short paragraphs that tell why the information will be helpful, the tips on classroom practice, and the Brain Nugget: “You cannot spoil an infant by attending to him quickly when he needs something.” Action plans to support children’s brain health and growth can follow.

Similarly, a family education night could review brain development and then explore some of the 52 topics and in-home application. For the price, no
program should be without this useful tool on the teacher and family library shelves.

**Thrifty Teacher’s Guide to Creative Learning Centers**
Written by Shelley Nicholson and Jessica Martinez. Gryphon House, 2017. ($29.95)

One of the biggest challenges made to teacher-prep students comes with an assignment is to prepare a classroom learning activity without spending any money. The seduction of tools, materials, equipment, and props in a teacher supply store are almost overwhelming. In reality, however, teacher salaries are so low that a quick trip to the supply store can quickly eat up an entire paycheck.

Educators Nicholson and Martinez have compiled a beautifully formatted and organized collection of easy-to-make, cost-free, and educationally engaging materials for early care and education classroom. The book’s chapters are organized around learning centers—from art to science—and guide teachers with step-by-step instructions on material making.

Color photos both guide and inspire. Reusing old materials in new ways and recycling materials that seem to have lost their primary function infuse the collection. For example, a simple, quick, and cost-saving trick for the art center describes making cups of watercolor paint from dried-out, water-based markers or scrap cakes of watercolor paint.

Chapter 1 reviews the basics of creating and sustaining imaginative learning center play, providing guidance on developmentally appropriate materials, safety, and gathering and repurposing material treasures.

Subsequent chapter introductions review specific interest center functions, best practices, and learning concepts along with recipes for creating numerous engaging, instructive, and no-cost materials. Butterfly wings anyone?