

Quality indicators: Curriculum and lesson plans

Traditionally, *curriculum* described what teachers considered essential learning for children at a particular age or school grade level. Early care and education teachers absorbed this concept, often to satisfy children's families, and gradually turned away from rich, play-based discovery activities toward a formula for who is taught what, and when.

Unfortunately, this approach contradicts what we know about how children develop and learn. Most simply, *curriculum* is a plan that describes the knowledge, skills, abilities, and understandings children need to be successful in the moment and in the future. It predicts outcomes that are developmentally appropriate and educationally significant to individuals and groups of children (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). Curriculum is the framework from which teachers build meaningful, engaging learning experiences that reflect both learning goals and children's interests.

Best practices in early childhood education hold

that teachers recognize children's unique skills (meet the children where they are) and help the children to reach and achieve their next developmental goals. Early care and education isn't simply about cognitive development. It instead recognizes that each of the developmental domains—emotional, physical, social, **and** cognitive—must be supported, fostered, and regularly reevaluated.

Development across domains is unique to each child and reflects a carefully synchronized system of interactions—language skills influence social interactions that impact physical challenges that color emotional well-being. The most effective programs, therefore, address all domains, and each child's progress is observable and measurable.

Building a curriculum

Consistent with best practice, early childhood teachers observe and document individual children's work, interactions, play, behaviors, and interests to assess development and learning **and** to plan, schedule, and organize.

In early childhood programs, curriculum is the three-way intersection of observation, assessment, and planning; it's built on what a child already knows (observation), what the child needs to know (assessment), and a plan (activities) for continued development across all domains.

Teachers make children's learning personal—reflecting a child's skills and interests—by planning interactions that encourage children to explore, master, and build personal meaning or understanding through those interactions with both people and materials in the environment. Whether with unit blocks, paint, or dress-up clothes, exploration, mastery, and meaning are key. Interactions with people are similar: over time, children build skills in recognizing individual differences, solving problems and



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disagreements, and identifying and using the tools for successful interpersonal relationships.

Curriculum goals best reflect what early care and education professionals believe children should know, understand, and be able to do across domains and disciplines.

Less successful curriculum approaches disregard this continuum and assume all children learn in the same way at the same time, have the same interests, and demonstrate mastery of a concept in the same ways. For example, when a teacher decides that all 2-year-olds will learn to identify the color *orange* in October, she forgets that some already know the color, some are too busy mastering fluid locomotion to care, and none are ready to comprehend the abstract construct of the monthly calendar.

Similarly, expecting all 3-year-olds to actively (but not wiggly) participate in a 30-minute-long large group activity is doomed to failure because of varying abilities to control muscles, social interactions, language, and attention.

Instead, an effective and appropriate early childhood curriculum reflects what we know about how children learn—how they learn to think from concrete to abstract; how they regard themselves and others within a framework of trust and shared values; and how they develop physical skills as their bodies grow in size, strength, and coordination. Even the most praised published curriculum will need modifications to meet the needs of all the children in a group.

Further, a well-organized, attractive, and material-rich physical environment facilitates a child's physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive successes. The physical environment reflects a teacher's knowledge and respect of individual children and children in a learning community group. Experienced teachers know to make the environment a cheerful but calm space that communicates welcome, trust, and respect.

Implementing the curriculum

Most early care and education programs facilitate children's interactions with materials and other people using learning or *interest centers*. Interest centers serve both children and teachers. For children, centers invite concrete exploration and mastery of art, science, math, movement, literacy, construction, and dramatic play. The centers give teachers a platform for implementing a curriculum that addresses children's developmental goals across domains and across disciplines—language, literacy, math, social studies, science, art, music, movement, and health.

EARLY LEARNING STANDARDS CAN COEXIST WITH BEST PRACTICES.

Successful interest centers are planned to encourage independence, cooperation, curiosity, and discovery. They guide children into active, social activities with other children (like blocks, sensory, and dramatic play) or into introspective, quiet activities (like books, writing, and art).

Materials are accessible and inviting—children can choose materials that are logical and constructive. There is adequate space for large and small groups to gather, lighting is appropriate to the tasks, and each center is equipped with materials that are engaging, in working order, attractive, and reflective of children's cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

These centers help ensure children's success in meeting development and learning goals—they make active choices that are engaging, they use materials with care, they work with concentration, focus, and perseverance, and they interact with others in positive,

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mutually supportive ways—all within the planned curriculum.

Consider building curriculum webs to determine how well you meet curriculum goals and how you might enhance classroom (indoors and outside) interest centers to address specific domains or disciplines. For example, developmental experts agree that 3-year-olds are beginning to build balancing, hopping, and jumping skills, and your program has included these physical milestones in the curriculum plan. Build a web (see example) that puts these physical skills at the center. Draw lines to interest centers that have potential impact on the skills, and list current and future materials or activities that can scaffold the children's development. Accept that these skills demand practice and are integrated into life-long skills like riding a bicycle, driving, or negotiating around a mud puddle.

And consider: Do you actively support children in their efforts to balance, hop, and jump? Or do you discourage skill development—either by regularly

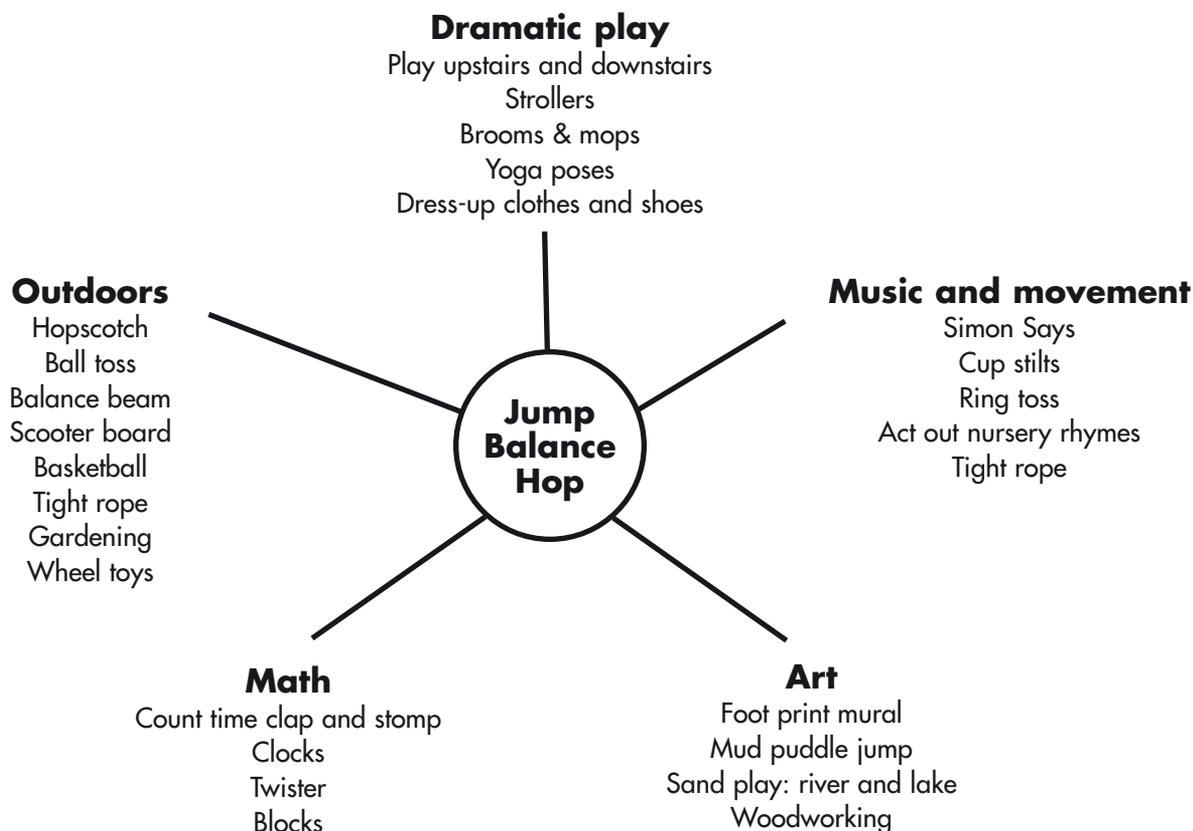
interrupting their efforts under the guise of guidance, or by limiting them by not providing adequate time or by differentiating skills for boys and girls?

Planning daily experiences

A teacher's ability to negotiate the terrain of child-led versus teacher-led activities is essential to successful early childhood experiences. Learning happens across domains, and most learning goals relate to more than one domain.

Hand-eye coordination, for example, demands physical, cognitive, and emotional involvement. In this case, the teacher leads by reflecting on the age and skill level of the child against established developmental milestones and educational goals: Building and refining hand-eye coordination is developmentally appropriate for a group of 3-year-olds.

The teacher then invites exploration, discovery, and mastery by offering children a variety of materials and experiences they need to build and refine their skills. Examples are lacing beads and cards,



puzzles, pegboards, scissors, connecting blocks, bean bags and targets, pitchers and cups, and writing tools. Each of the materials supports the learning goal, and each also offers the child opportunities for creativity, social interaction, and success in mastery.

As teachers develop observation, reflection, and planning skills, they appropriately rely less on a prescribed timeline and more on what they know children need and want to know. Observation and reflection guide planning; the lesson plan that was effective last year isn't likely to be equally successful with this year's new community of learners.

Successful programs and teachers approach planning daily experiences from a standard framework that encourages the development of a cohesive, caring group that is aware and respectful of individual differences.

Schedule. Typically, the schedule accounts for transition times like arrival, moving from the outdoor to the indoor classroom, meals, and rest time. It balances active and quiet activities as well as large group, small group, and solitary work. The routine reflects the teacher's knowledge of and respect for the children in the group. Consistency in routine lets children feel secure and autonomous—they learn to know what comes next—and are able to relax into the schedule rather than testing limits in every activity change.

For every age group, schedules reflect not only the length of the day but also the countless daily modifications that impact children, like teacher changes in

programs that operate from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., whether children bring lunch and snack from home, and whether toilet learning is the primary classroom activity for a few months. Schedules also reflect extended opportunities for children to explore materials respecting different developmental levels, interests, safety, and culture.

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION ISN'T SIMPLY ABOUT COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT.

Teachers encourage perseverance and tenacity by gradually extending learning center opportunities—and time—for deepening involvement and mastery of materials. Teacher-imposed time limits in learning centers undermine a child's ability to lengthen the attention span and develop more complex play scenarios.

Programs and teachers use a variety of planning frameworks for scheduling daily activities. Some lesson plans are loose outlines of what happens when, while others focus on large- and small-group activities related to a specific theme like worms, apples, or garbage. And some describe specific goals, materials, and vocabulary for each classroom interest area like art, construction, sensory explorations, literacy, numeracy, dramatic play, and music.

Lesson plans. In every case, lesson plans include space on the written form (and in planning) for outdoor experiences, plans for transitions, notes about ongoing activities or projects, and ideas for group cooperation and relationship building.

Many teachers also find it essential to include private (not posted on the classroom door) reflection notes on the lesson plan. These might include activity modifications for specific children, reflections on why a particular book was engaging (or not), and reminders for planning in the following weeks. These private plans often give the first clues to children's interests that might develop into long-term class projects; red flags about developmental delays; and insights into children's personalities, temperaments, learning styles, and interests.

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Including developmental goals across domains and specific activities for children as active learners is key to a lesson plan's usefulness in serving both teachers and children. Simply, most successful lesson plans are the tools teachers need for observing, reflecting, and planning experiences that support learning in the group and in the individual children in the group.

Highlighting program quality

Quality in early care and education programs is a complex cost-benefit analysis. The cost of quality care must balance its benefits to the program, the children, the family, and the community at large. When program funders (public funders that offer tax dollar subsidies, private donors, and parents who pay fees) look at the cost-benefit balance, they expect to see visible and long-lasting signs of child success: perseverance, self-regulation, and attainment of skills across developmental domains and academic fields.

Programs that earn public support (in funding and in reputation) work to achieve that success within the framework of *best practices* for young children—recognizing that each child learns and develops uniquely. Identified, developmentally appropriate learning goals and standards help teachers plan curriculum and daily experiences that serve each child in a community of young learners.

Early learning standards can coexist with best practices. Using the observation, reflection, and planning cycle, teachers can integrate learning into every classroom activity and routine. And all early childhood classrooms can be joy-filled, active, and engaging.

Resources

- Copple, C. and Sue Bredekamp, Eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, 3rd Ed.* Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Dodge, Diane Trister. 1991. *Creative Curriculum.* Washington, D.C.: Teaching Strategies.
- Gronlund, Gaye. 2013. *Planning for Play, Observation, and Learning in Preschool and Kindergarten.* St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press. ■