

SIX PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE POLICY

1. Young children learn through active, direct experiences and play.²⁰

Young children learn best through active learning experiences within meaningful contexts. They need materials that can be used in multiple ways and allow for hands-on exploration and problem solving. They need dynamic, ongoing relationships with teachers who understand child development, can build onto and extend their hands-on activities, and provide well-thought out educational experiences that demonstrate knowledge of and respect for each child. The teachers must be able to create time in the schedule to promote these active experiences between children, as peer interactions play a crucial role in cognitive learning and social-emotional development.

2. Children learn skills and concepts at different times, rates, and paces. Every child is unique.^{5, 26}

Every child possesses a unique personality, temperament, family relationship and cultural background. Each has different interests, experiences and approaches to learning. Each child perceives and approaches the world differently, often taking different routes to reach the same ends. Thus, all children need learning experiences that take into account, support and build onto who they are as individuals.

3. Young children learn best when their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical selves become highly engaged in the learning process.

Active learning experiences and play engage multiple aspects of the child's capacities simultaneously. A curriculum focused on academic standards and goals compartmentalizes learning in ways that are not natural for young children. Hands-on, play-based, experiential learning engages the whole child and strengthens and supports young children's intellectual dispositions and their innate thirst for better, fuller, and deeper understanding of their own experiences.²⁷

4. Assessments of young children should be observational in nature, ongoing, and connected to curriculum and teaching. They should take into account the broad-based nature of young children's learning, not isolated skills, and the natural developmental variation in all areas of young children's growth and development.

Assessment methods should be developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of families, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, (2) identifying concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.²¹

Assessments in early childhood should be as infrequent as possible to maintain high program quality. Standardized tests are highly unreliable for children younger than 3rd grade and should not be used in early childhood settings.^{10, 13, 28} The linking of test scores to teacher evaluation or to program evaluation leads to an increase in standards and test-based instruction, and less developmentally appropriate play-based, experiential education.

Administrators need to emphasize quality educational experiences and teaching, not test scores in the early years.¹⁰

5. The problems of inequality and child poverty need to be addressed directly.

Almost one quarter of our nation's children live in poverty.¹⁸ We need to do what other developed nations do which is to ensure that all of their children have health care, housing, and basic needs met for economic security and well being. Then we must fund our schools equitably, by giving more money to the schools and students where needs are greatest, which are most commonly schools in low-income neighborhoods. Educational funds should not be distributed to states based on their acceptance of specific education reforms, such as we have seen in the last decade. If we begin to redress some of the profound inequalities that exist for children in the U.S. today, this will be the surest way to genuinely improve schools and overall well-being and success for all of the nation's children.

6. Quality early childhood education with well-prepared teachers is the best investment a society can make in its future.

Research shows that early childhood education enhances the life prospects of children and has a high benefit-cost ratio and rate of return for society's investment. The Perry Preschool Project, a major longitudinal study of a quality preschool education program, showed that investment in high-quality preschool education improved the lives of those who were in the program and paid handsome returns to society. Building a strong foundation for learning in the early years is especially crucial for disadvantaged children.²²

The United States ranks twenty-fourth among wealthy nations in providing availability and quality of early childhood education.²³ Committing to high quality early childhood education with well-prepared teachers is a crucial first step our nation can take in reducing the achievement gaps between rich and poor children and improving the lives of children.

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Resources

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