



Advocacy Campaign Sign-On Statement

Defending the Early Years calls on all early childhood educators, administrators, advocates, and parents to refuse policies and practices that are not based on principles of child development. We are troubled by the frequent reports of early childhood teachers being required to implement practices that do not align with what they know young children need for optimal child development. Thus we are launching a national advocacy campaign to support the early childhood community in restoring the link between high-quality early childhood education and principles of child development. We ask that you read the full statement below and add your name to this living document. We will provide resources to educate administrators, elected officials, and other policymakers about the importance of centering principles of child development in our curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. We want early childhood educators to utilize research from child development and related fields to inform their everyday practices in children. We need those in charge to give them space and freedom to do what they know is best.

What We Know About Child Development

1. Children are naturally curious and have an innate desire to learn about the world.
2. Children are active learners who construct knowledge through hands-on experiences.
3. Children learn through play.
4. Children need environments that foster positive identity development.
5. Children need ample opportunities to move their bodies and use their voices.
6. Children need caring and nurturing relationships with adults.
7. Children need agency over their learning.
8. Children need ample time outdoors.
9. Children need opportunities to develop self-control, self-regulation, and executive function.
10. Children need space to fail and struggle so they can learn to persist and try again.

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In Defense of Early Childhood Education and Care: Restoring the Link Between High Quality and Child Development

Background

Our knowledge of how to support children's optimal growth and development has greatly improved. Advances in [theories of child development](#), innovative [research in neuroscience](#), and a deeper awareness of the [intersection between nature and nurture](#) have aided in our ability to create supportive environments that provide a solid foundation in the early years. Early childhood teachers can learn this through their teacher education programs, ensuring they are well-equipped to meet the needs of the children placed in their care. Through careful observation of young children, they can witness for themselves the mechanisms of development and identify best practices for supporting the natural progression of developmental outcomes. Working with parents to share information and collaborating with colleagues can further bolster their pedagogical skills. The more time early childhood teachers spend caring for young children, the better they become at guiding their development.

Unfortunately, what we know about child development is not being used to guide many of the policies, curricular choices, and mandated practices. Driven by accusations of "children being left behind" and "learning loss," many states are pushing a [heavy emphasis on academic rigor into the lives of young children](#). Earlier reports of [kindergarten being the new first grade](#) were not enough to stem this harmful pattern. Many children are denied the time to play and instead are subjected to [standardized assessments](#) and [developmentally inappropriate expectations](#). Though those in power claim this is all in the best interest of helping low-income, racially marginalized children, the reality is that these children continue to suffer when denied what wealthier, whiter children are given. And those early childhood teachers who know about child development are routinely silenced and ignored, while new teachers are taught to believe that forcing early academics is the only way to keep their job.

In 2022 the [first randomized controlled study on the effects of academic preschools](#) made it clear that we have been on the wrong path. Researchers at Vanderbilt were able to conduct a multi-phased longitudinal study on the academic and behavioral effects of Tennessee's state-funded pre-k program. Given the limited seats available to all the children that applied, the researchers were able to study those who attended the program and those who could not. At the end of the first year, those in the state-funded preschool program showed the expected increase in academic skills. However, by third grade, those gains were gone, and by sixth grade, students who attended the state-funded pre-K program were doing worse academically and behaviorally. One of the lead researchers, Dale Farran, [argues that it is the academic focus of the state-funded preschools](#) that led to these alarming findings. The early introduction of surface-level skills does not allow young children to participate in experiences that foster broader underlying skills. And it is those broader underlying skills that lead to better academic achievement as children get older.

Many of us were not surprised by these findings but instead were relieved that the data others needed to see finally arrived. Unfortunately, having the data does not mean a return to early childhood education built on principles of child development. Instead, we continue to see the push for high-quality early childhood education fueled by disregarding what children need. Thus the time has come for us to resist policies, practices, and curriculums that are not aligned with all that we know about optimal child development. As early childhood educators, childcare providers, teacher educators, parents, and caregivers, we must advocate for restoring the link between high-quality and child development.

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What We Know Does Not Support Child Development

1. Forcing children to sit still for long periods of time.
2. Forcing children to be quiet and suppress their questions.
3. Making children rush through multiple teacher-directed activities.
4. Denying children their agency until they earn it.
5. Restricting time outside.
6. Forcing children to meet unrealistic expectations.
7. Critical and uncaring adults and environments.
8. Restricting time for play and exploration.
9. Overrelying on teacher-directed activities.
10. Preparing for standardized testing

What Early Childhood Educators Can Do

1. Identify policies, practices, and curriculums that are not based on child development.
2. Document how mandates interfere with optimal child development.
3. Share your high-quality practices linked to what we know about child development.
4. Inform parents about your approach to supporting child development.
5. Advocate for restoring the link between high-quality early childhood education and child development.

What Administrators, Principals, and other Educational Leaders Can Do

6. Learn about child development.
7. Evaluate policies, practices, and curriculums and eliminate those that are not based on principles of child development.
8. Listen to early childhood educators and parents.
9. Remove all standardized assessments for children under age 12.
10. Mandate at least one hour of play in the classroom and one hour of play outside for all children.

Join Us

We owe it to every child to advocate for the best early childhood education possible. We know what it takes, and we know how to do it. What we lack is the will on behalf of those with the power. Thus, we must demand that they do what we know is right. In defense of early childhood education and care, we must restore the link between high quality and child development. We invite you to show your support for this campaign by adding your name and sharing our statement.

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