

LINKING HIGH QUALITY TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT

AN ADVOCACY TOOLKIT



A TOOLKIT TO SUPPORT THE DEY CAMPAIGN:
*IN DEFENSE OF ECEC: RESTORING THE LINK BETWEEN HIGH QUALITY AND
CHILD DEVELOPMENT*

May 30, 2025

Dear Early Childhood Education and Care Advocate,

In 2022, we launched the **In Defense of ECEC: Restoring the Link Between High Quality and Child Development** campaign. Our goal was to build awareness and support for ensuring that all early childhood policies and practices are firmly rooted in what we know about child development. We continue to be alarmed by the increasing number of stories about educators and caregivers being forced to engage in practices that have no basis in child development, yet are considered “high-quality”. Thus, we developed this campaign to support the early childhood community in ensuring that their work aligns with research-based best practices.

After issuing our campaign statement and securing over 175 endorsements, we hosted community forums, collected information on quality through surveys and focus groups, and created regional working groups to support local advocacy efforts. Most importantly, we aimed to utilize our platform to instill confidence in early childhood educators and caregivers, empowering them to apply their knowledge and skills to foster high-quality, whole-child development.

Today, we are excited to share our newest resource for this campaign, **our advocacy toolkit**. Using our list of 10 things we know about child development, as published in the original campaign statement, we created this toolkit to provide brief talking points, snapshots of practices that work well and those that don't, strategies for making change, and resources.

We hope you find this resource valuable as you continue to advocate for this issue. Whether you are meeting with an elected official, chatting with parents in the park, leading a discussion with fellow early childhood educators, or presenting at a conference, you have the power to advocate on behalf of all young children and their families. Building awareness is a crucial first step in any efforts to bring about change.

Thank you for your support of Defending the Early Years and for helping us make our vision of a just, equitable, high-quality early years education a reality.

In Solidarity,

Denisha Jones

Denisha Jones, Ph.D., J.D.
Executive Director
Defending the Early Years



Toolkit Overview

For each of the 10 statements, you will find the following:

- What We Believe
- Why This is Important
- What it Looks Like When We Get it Right/What it Feels Like When We Get it Wrong
- Advocacy Strategies (* indicates potential for DEY mini-grant funding)
- Resources (books, articles, organizations, people, podcasts, etc.)

What We Know About Child Development

(Click on a statement to go to that page. These statements were written by Kisha Reid, Founder of Discovery: A Place for Childhood.)

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 need ample time and space to engage in free play every day.
4. Children need environments that foster positive/healthy 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.

At the end of the toolkit, we include our original campaign statement.

Click on the DEY logo to return to this page.



1. Children are naturally curious and have an innate desire to learn about the world.

What We Believe

We believe that children are born with a natural curiosity and an intrinsic motivation to explore and understand the world around them. This innate desire to learn drives their questions, observations, and discoveries, forming the foundation for lifelong learning and growth.

Why This is Important

Recognizing and supporting children's natural curiosity and innate desire to learn is crucial because it lays the foundation for meaningful, lifelong learning. When we value their questions and encourage exploration, we help children develop critical thinking, creativity, and confidence. This support fosters a love of learning, rather than a fear of failure, and helps children become self-motivated, resilient learners.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Child-led exploration validates the children's interests and deepens their learning through inquiry.	If curiosity is dismissed or ignored, children may stop asking questions or lose enthusiasm when their interests are brushed aside in favor of rigid schedules or adult-directed lessons.
Open-ended questions and materials encourage critical thinking, creativity, and experimentation without fear of being "wrong."	Fearing failure in environments where there's only one "right" answer, children may become anxious, withdrawn, or reluctant to try new things.
Providing safe space for wondering and making mistakes nurtures confidence and the belief that their thoughts and questions are valuable.	When learning feels disconnected from their natural interests, children may appear bored, distracted, or resistant, signaling that their intrinsic motivation isn't being tapped.

1. Children are naturally curious and have an innate desire to learn about the world.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Advocate for Play-Based, Inquiry-Driven Learning

- **Strategy:** Promote approaches that allow children to explore, question, and discover rather than memorize and repeat.
- **Suggestions:** Encourage programs to use emergent curriculum that builds on children's interests. *Share how play supports brain development and long-term academic success. Push back on academic pushdown that replaces exploration with worksheets or drills.

2. Encourage Environments That Spark Wonder

- **Strategy:** Support the creation of spaces that invite hands-on exploration, discovery, and creativity.
- **Suggestions:** Advocate for classrooms filled with open-ended materials, sensory bins, nature items, and rotating provocations. Help design environments that celebrate curiosity over control.

3. Champion Educator Practices That Follow Children's Questions

- **Strategy:** Promote teaching methods that start with what children wonder about and guide learning from there.
- **Suggestions:** Encourage educators to use open-ended questions, listen closely, and build projects based on children's observations. Share documentation of children's learning journeys that began with a simple question or interest.

4. Educate Families and Policymakers on the Value of Intrinsic Motivation

- **Strategy:** Help adults understand that children are naturally driven to learn when their interests are respected and supported.
- **Suggestions:** *Provide workshops or materials on curiosity-led learning and why external rewards or rigid goals can dull motivation. Highlight research that shows how curiosity fuels deeper learning and long-term success.

5. Protect Time and Freedom for Exploration

- **Strategy:** Advocate for unhurried, flexible daily schedules that give children the space to follow their ideas and interests.
- **Suggestions:** Recommend longer blocks of open-ended time for self-directed play, discovery, and project work. Encourage policies that allow children to revisit and deepen investigations over days or weeks.

1. Children are naturally curious and have an innate desire to learn about the world.

Resources

Books

- ["The Scientist in the Crib: What Early Learning Tells Us About the Mind"](#) by Alison Gopnik, Andrew N. Meltzoff, and Patricia K. Kuhl
- ["Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs"](#) by Ellen Galinsky
- ["Free to Learn"](#) by Peter Gray
- ["The Original Learning Approach: Weaving Together Playing, Learning, and Teaching in Early Childhood"](#) by Suzanne Axelsson

Articles

- ["Why Curiosity Enhances Learning"](#) - Edutopia
- ["Tips on Nurturing Your Child's Curiosity"](#)- Zero to Three
- ["Curiosity Is the Key to Learning"](#) - Psychology Today
- ["The Role of Curiosity in Early Childhood Development"](#) - Early Advantage
- ["A Curious Mind: How educators and parents can encourage and guide children's natural curiosity — in the classroom and at home"](#) - Harvard Graduate School of Education

Organizations

- [The Center on the Developing Child](#) – Harvard University
- [Zero to Three](#)
- [The Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Kristen Day & Play](#)
- [Listen to the Children](#)
- [Teacher Tom](#)
- [@naturallycuriouschildren](#) (Instagram)

2. Children are active learners who construct knowledge through hands-on experiences.

What We Believe

Children learn best by doing. They actively make sense of their world by exploring, experimenting, and engaging with materials, people, and ideas. Learning should be active and guided by inquiry and exploration. Children need ample time and space to construct knowledge and foster optimal whole-child development.

Why This is Important

Hands-on experiences deepen understanding, build critical thinking, and support long-term learning. Active engagement promotes curiosity, motivation, and the development of complex cognitive skills.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Children engage in experiments, building projects, and real-world problem solving. This makes learning authentic and engaging.	Children are often expected to be passive learners, leading many to become bored, to disengage, and to exhibit challenging behaviors.
“Designing spaces for multiple ways to gain knowledge. Adequate time for children to soak up new relevant information, so children can make connections with their lives and draw parallels”. Suzanne Axelsson	Children’s ideas are often overlooked, and the focus is on transmitting standards and imparting content. Educators often fail to take the time to get to know children or see them as a valuable source of knowledge.
Educators encourage exploration by asking open-ended questions and facilitating hands-on discovery.	Learning is often viewed as a task to complete rather than a meaningful experience. Children have to wait until recess to participate in hands-on, engaging activities.

2. Children are active learners who construct knowledge through hands-on experiences.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Promote Learning Through Play and Exploration

- **Strategy:** Advocate for learning environments where children engage actively with materials, people, and ideas through meaningful play.
- **Suggestion:** Share examples of how children learn concepts like math, science, and literacy through block play, pretend scenarios, and sensory activities. Push for recognition of play as a legitimate, deep learning experience.

2. Advocate for Open-Ended Materials and Real Tools

- **Strategy:** Encourage the use of materials that children can manipulate, investigate, and use in multiple ways.
- **Suggestion:** Recommend including items like loose parts, natural materials, clay, water, and real-life tools. Encourage programs to minimize pre-made, one-outcome worksheets or toys with one or limited use.

3. Support Project-Based and Inquiry Learning

- **Strategy:** Promote long-term investigations and projects where children ask questions, test ideas, and build understanding through experience.
- **Suggestion:** Advocate for time in the schedule and flexibility in the curriculum to support deep, hands-on exploration. Help educators document and showcase children's thinking, discoveries, and evolving ideas.

4. Educate Others on How Young Children Learn Best

- **Strategy:** Help families, administrators, and policymakers understand that young children learn through doing—not sitting still and listening.
- **Suggestion:** *Share brain research and developmental science that supports active, sensory-based learning. Offer tours, videos, or documentation panels that show hands-on learning in action. Create family engagement opportunities where parents experience play-based learning firsthand.

5. Protect Time for Deep, Uninterrupted Engagement

- **Strategy:** Advocate for daily schedules that allow children extended periods to explore, build, experiment, and revisit their ideas.
- **Suggestion:** Push for policies that prioritize depth of experience over quantity of instruction. Support practices where children return to previous work to extend or refine their thinking.

2. Children are active learners who construct knowledge through hands-on experiences.

Resources

Books
• "The Hundred Languages of Children" by Loris Malaguzzi (and others) • "Experience and Education" by John Dewey • "Powerful Learning: What We Know About Teaching for Understanding" by Linda Darling-Hammond • "Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul" by Stuart Brown
Articles
• "Learning Through Play: A Review of the Evidence" – The LEGO Foundation • "Active Learning in Early Childhood"- Children's Healthcare Associates • "Piaget's Theory of Education" - The Education Hub • "Principles of Child Development and Learning and Implications That Inform Practice" - NAEYC
Organizations
• Project Zero – Harvard Graduate School of Education • The LEGO Foundation • National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
People, Podcast, Social Media
• Not Just Cute - Amanda Morgan Podcast • Rooted in Play • Suzanne Axleson- Substack • @tinkerwonderplay (Instagram) • @learningthroughplay8 (Instagram) • #ReggioEmilia and #LearningThroughPlay

3. Children need ample time and space to engage in free play every day.

What We Believe

Play is the foundation for whole-child optimal development. DEY National Advisor Suzanne Axelsson reminds us that “Play is life. It is our primary way of development and understanding the world, and mental health. We never stop playing, but how we play changes”. Play is not a break from learning or a reward for learning, play is learning and development.

Why This is Important

Children are wired to explore, experiment, and understand their world through play. It’s how they make sense of experiences, try out ideas, and develop cognitive skills. Unlike formal instruction, play is self-directed and deeply engaging. Through play, children develop cognitive skills (i.e., problem-solving, memory, creativity, and decision-making); social skills (i.e., cooperation, negotiation, empathy, and conflict resolution); emotional skills (i.e, self-regulation, confidence, and resilience); and physical skills (i.e., fine and gross motor development). Children are not mini-adults. Play aligns with their developmental stage, meeting them where they are rather than imposing formal structures they may not be ready for.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Children have the time and space to play freely with a variety of materials. Children are engaged, confident, and collaborating. They explore at their own pace and feel valued.	The day is rigidly scheduled with mostly desk work, worksheets, and direct instruction. Play is limited to brief recess or seen as a reward. Children feel restless, frustrated, or bored.
Social and emotional skills develop authentically through play. Children develop empathy, communication, and conflict-resolution skills in a safe, meaningful way. They feel supported and emotionally secure.	Children are forced to participate in scripted teacher-led social and emotional lessons and denied time to play. They miss opportunities to build social skills, and the environment feels less emotionally safe.
Children build the foundation for pre-literacy and numeracy skills through child-directed play. Children gain confidence and see themselves as capable learners which fosters a stable foundation for future academic learning.	Direct instruction is believed to be the only way to teach academic skills. Children are expected to learn through rote drills, memorization, and worksheets. Children may disengage or develop anxiety around learning. Natural curiosity and love for learning are eroded.

3. Children need ample time and space to engage in free play every day.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Educate Others with Evidence

- **Strategy:** *Share research and real-world examples that show how play supports brain development, academic readiness, and emotional well-being.
- **Suggestions:** Use infographics, videos, and articles from trusted sources (e.g., NAEYC, DEY Teacher Speak Out videos). Present at PTA meetings or staff development sessions. *Share learning stories or observations from the classroom/home, showcasing growth through play.

2. Use Social Media and Community Platforms

- **Strategy:** Raise awareness publicly by sharing examples of play-led learning in action.
- **Suggestions:** Post photos (with permission), short videos, or anecdotes about children engaged in meaningful play, along with captions highlighting the learning. Start or contribute to blogs, newsletters, or community forums on child development and education.

3. Build Alliances and Speak Up

- **Strategy:** Join forces with other educators and families to advocate for play-friendly policies and practices in schools and communities.
- **Suggestion:** *Form or join parent/educator coalitions, early childhood networks, or advocacy groups. Speak at school board meetings or write letters to decision-makers to support mandated time for child-led, unstructured play.

4. Embed Play in Policy and Practice

- **Strategy:** Advocate for play to be embedded in official policies, curriculum frameworks, and educational standards.
- **Suggestions:** Propose curriculum guidelines that include play-led learning outcomes. Help draft school or district policies that protect time for unstructured play and reflection. Advocate for professional development on play-led teaching.

5. Share Research on Harms of Academic Learning in the Early Years

- **Strategy:** Build awareness of the results of the Tennessee Pre-K study.
- **Suggestions:** Host a group discussion that reviews the troubling findings from the Tennessee Pre-K study (see resources). Share blogs with parents and educators that provide an overview of the iceberg model of developmental competencies (see resources).

3. Children need ample time and space to engage in free play every day.

Resources

Books

- ["Let the Children Play: How More Play Will Save Our Schools and Help Children Thrive"](#) by Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle
- ["Not Just Cute: How Powerful Play Drives Development in Early Childhood"](#) by Amanda Morgan
- ["Play and Social Justice: Equity, Advocacy, and Opportunity"](#) edited by Olga S. Jarrett, Vera L Stenhouse, John A. Sutterby, & Michael M. Patte
- ["The Power of Play"](#) by David Elkind

Articles

- ["Play Deficit as Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Health"](#) by Peter Gray
- ["The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children"](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics
- ["Effects of a Statewide Prekindergarten Program on Children's Achievement and Behavior through Sixth Grade"](#) by Kelley Durkin, Mark W Lipsey, Dale C Farran, & Sarah E Wiesen (Tennessee Pre-K Study)
- ["Early Developmental Competencies: Or Why Pre-K Does Not Have Lasting Effects"](#) by Dale Farran (Tennessee Pre-K Study Blog)
- ["How School Reforms are Failing Low-Income Young Children"](#) by Diane Levin and Judith Van Hoorn

Organizations

- [The Alliance for Childhood](#)
- [National Institute for Play](#)
- [The International Play Association \(World\)](#) and [\(USA\)](#)
- [The Playwork Foundation](#)
- [Hatch Partners in Play](#)
- [The Global Recess Alliance](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Peter Gray, Play Makes Us Human Substack](#)
- [@geniusofplay](#) (Instagram)
- [Play Empowers- Sharing The Power Of Play](#) (Facebook)
- [@theplaylabfoundation](#) (Instagram)
- [That Early Childhood Nerd](#) (Podcast)
- [#LetThemPlay](#), [#PlayMatters](#), [#UnstructuredPlay](#)

4. Children need environments that foster positive/healthy identity development.

What We Believe

We believe that children need environments that affirm who they are and support the development of a strong, positive self-concept. This includes spaces where they feel seen, valued, and respected for their race, culture, language, family structure, abilities, and individuality. Healthy identity development is rooted in relationships, representation, conscious awareness, and experiences that foster confidence, a sense of belonging, and self-worth.

Why This is Important

Recognizing children’s need for healthy identity development in the early years is essential because it lays the foundation for self-worth, confidence, and belonging. When children feel seen, valued, and accepted, they are more engaged, resilient, and ready to learn. Healthy identity development also supports strong social-emotional skills and helps children navigate differences with empathy. Early experiences shape how children view themselves and others, making it vital to create inclusive, affirming environments from the start.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Classroom materials—books, dolls, artwork—reflect a wide range of cultures, languages, family structures, and abilities. Children regularly see themselves and others positively represented. Children feel seen, proud, and included.	Materials often reflect a single dominant culture or stereotype. There’s little acknowledgment of children’s diverse backgrounds or experiences. Children may feel invisible, excluded, or “less than.” They begin to question their value or internalize negative messages.
Educators greet children in their home languages, include cultural traditions in the curriculum, and invite families to share their stories and customs. Children take pride in who they are and where they come from.	Children are discouraged from speaking their home language, and cultural practices are ignored or tokenized. Children may feel pressure to hide parts of themselves, leading to shame, confusion, or loss of connection with their roots.
Children are free to explore their interests and roles without gendered limitations—such as boys playing with dolls or girls building with blocks—and adults respond with encouragement.	Adults enforce narrow gender roles or discourage nonconforming behaviors (“That’s not for boys!”). Children may feel shame or fear around self-expression, which can harm confidence and emotional well-being.

4. Children need environments that foster positive/healthy identity development.

Advocacy Strategies

*potential for DEY mini-grant funding

1. Speak Up for Inclusive Practices

- **Strategy:** Advocate for environments, policies, and curricula that reflect and respect the diverse identities of children.
- **Suggestions:** Request books, visuals, and materials that reflect varied cultures, languages, family structures, and abilities. Encourage administrators and curriculum developers to include equity and identity in early learning standards.

2. Partner with Families

- **Strategy:** Collaborate with families to understand and honor each child's background, values, and experiences.
- **Suggestions:** Invite families to share stories, traditions, and languages in the classroom. Advocate for school practices that respect cultural differences, including holidays, food, and communication styles.

3. Educate Others About Identity Development

- **Strategy:** Share knowledge about how identity forms in the early years and why it matters.
- **Suggestions:** *Host workshops, discussions, or newsletters for colleagues and parents explaining the link between identity, belonging, and learning. Utilize child development research to support advocacy efforts.

4. Model Inclusive Language and Behavior

- **Strategy:** Be a visible example of respect, inclusion, and affirmation of all identities.
- **Suggestions:** Use children's correct names and pronouns, affirm diverse family structures, and respond thoughtfully to bias or exclusion. Help others reflect on unconscious bias and stereotypes.

5. Advocate for Anti-Bias Training and Equity Policies

- **Strategy:** Push for systemic change that supports identity development for all children.
- **Suggestions:** Campaign for regular anti-bias and equity training for educators. Support policies that promote diversity in hiring, curriculum design, and classroom practices. Encourage people to download and use *DEY's Framework: Fostering Healthy Identity in Young Children*.

4. Children need environments that foster positive/healthy identity development.

Resources

Books

- "Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race" by Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum
- "Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves" by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards
- "Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain" by Zaretta Hammond
- "Pro-Blackness in Early Childhood Education" by Gloria Swindler Boutte, Jarvais J. Jackson, Saudah N. Collins, Janice R. Baines, Anthony Broughton, & George Lee Johnson Jr.
- "Identity Affirming Classrooms: Spaces that Center Humanity" by Erica Buchanan-Rivera

Articles

- "Supporting Healthy Identity Development Excerpt from A Place to Begin: Working With Parents on Issues of Diversity" by Dora Pulido-Tobiassen and Janet Gonzalez-Mena
- "Children are not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race" by Erin Winkler
- "Never Too Young To Support A Cause: Supporting Positive Identity Development Through Social Justice Curriculum in Preschool" by Veronica Benavides, Roxanne Ledda, Maimuna Mohammed
- "The Cycle of Socialization" by Bobbi Harro

Organizations

- EmbraceRace
- Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching for Tolerance)
- Anti-Bias Early Childhood Working Group (Washington, DC)
- National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI)
- Center for Racial Justice in Education
- Anahsa Consulting Journey to Nia Retreat

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- How Kids Actually Learn About Race- EmbraceRace Podcast
- @antibiasleadersece (Instagram)
- @wokekindergarten (Instagram)
- @LatinxParenting (Instagram)

5. Children need ample opportunities to move their bodies and use their voices.

What We Believe

We believe that children need ample opportunities to move their bodies and use their voices because active expression is essential to their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Movement and vocal expression help children explore the world, build coordination, communicate needs, and develop confidence. When children are free to move and speak, they learn to self-regulate, collaborate, and engage more deeply in their environment.

Why This is Important

Providing opportunities for children to move their bodies and use their voices is vital in early childhood settings because it supports whole-child development. Movement helps build motor skills, body awareness, and brain development, while vocal expression fosters language, communication, and self-confidence. These forms of expression are how young children explore, process emotions, and connect with others. Without space to move and speak freely, children may struggle to engage, regulate themselves, or feel heard—making this a core component of meaningful early learning environments.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Children learn through songs with gestures, dancing, building with large blocks, or acting out stories. The classroom includes space for both active and quiet play. Children are engaged, joyful, and able to focus better.	Children are expected to sit still for long periods, with minimal opportunities to move during the day. Children become restless, disengaged, or act out. They may feel frustrated or labeled as "disruptive" for having natural, age-appropriate energy and needs
Children are encouraged to share ideas, ask questions, sing, tell stories, and express emotions through words. Educators actively listen and respond with respect and understanding. Children feel heard, valued, and confident.	Children are frequently told to "be quiet" or "use an indoor voice," and are often discouraged from speaking unless spoken to. Children may feel silenced or unimportant. Over time, this can affect their confidence, language development, and willingness to participate.
Children have daily access to outdoor play areas, obstacle courses, nature walks, and climbing and running activities. Movement is seen as essential, not optional.	Outdoor time is canceled often or viewed as less important than academic instruction. Children may feel confined or anxious, missing opportunities for physical growth and stress relief.

5. Children need ample opportunities to move their bodies and use their voices.

Advocacy Strategies

*potential for DEY mini-grant funding

1. Educate Others on the Developmental Importance

- **Strategy:** *Share research and insights that show how movement and vocal expression support brain development, regulation, learning, and well-being.
- **Suggestions:** Use simple, accessible language to explain how movement boosts focus, coordination, and academic readiness.

2. Advocate for Flexible Schedules and Environments

- **Strategy:** Push for daily routines and physical spaces that allow for both structured and unstructured movement and expression.
- **Suggestions:** Encourage classroom designs with open areas, movement centers, and access to the outdoors. Propose daily schedules that include large blocks of time for free play, music, and gross motor activity.

3. Model and Encourage Movement and Voice

- **Strategy:** Show what it looks like to embed movement and vocal expression in everyday routines and learning.
- **Suggestions:** Lead movement-based songs, storytelling, or body-based games. Empower children to speak up, share ideas, and use expressive language during play and group time.

4. Engage Families as Partners

- **Strategy:** Involve families in valuing and supporting active, expressive learning at home and in school.
- **Suggestions:** Share simple movement activities or songs to try at home. Host workshops or family play nights to highlight the importance of active learning.

5. Advocate at the Policy and Program Level

- **Strategy:** Promote policies that protect time and resources for movement and self-expression in early learning environments.
- **Suggestions:** Support initiatives that prioritize physical education, outdoor play, and the arts in early years programs. Speak up when movement and voice are being minimized in favor of more rigid, academic approaches.

5. Children need ample opportunities to move their bodies and use their voices.

Resources

Books

- ["Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children"](#) by Angela Hanscom
- ["Let Them Move: Why It's Essential Students Get More Movement in Schools & How to Integrate More Movement into the Classroom for Greater Learning Outcomes"](#) by Rebecca Kramer Fiscal
- ["A Moving Child Is a Learning Child: How the Body Teaches the Brain to Think \(Birth to Age 7\)"](#) by Cheryl McCarthy, Gill Connell
- ["Art of Roughhousing: Good Old-Fashioned Horseplay and Why Every Kid Needs It"](#) by Anthony T. DeBenedet, M.D., Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D

Articles

- ["The Power of Movement in Teaching and Learning"](#) by Susan Griss
- ["Why Kids Need to Move, Touch and Experience to Learn"](#) by Katrina Schwartz
- ["More Than a Dozen Ways to Build Movement Into Learning"](#) by Stephen Merrill and Sarah Gonser
- ["The Benefits of Movement for Little Learners"](#) - The Good to Know Network

Organizations

- [Active Schools](#)
- [The LiINK Project® \(Let's inspire innovation 'N Kids\)](#)
- [Anji Play](#)
- [Successful Healthy Children](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Anna Beresin, PhD](#)
- [Rebecca London](#)
- [Heather Von Bank](#)
- [The Occuplaytional Therapist](#) (Facebook)
- [@playworksrecess](#) (Instagram)

6. Children need caring and nurturing relationships with adults.

What We Believe

We believe that children need caring and nurturing relationships with adults because these connections form the foundation for all development and learning. Warm, responsive relationships help children feel safe, valued, and understood, fostering trust and emotional security. Through consistent, loving interactions, children learn how to regulate emotions, build social skills, and explore the world with confidence.

Why This is Important

Caring and nurturing relationships in early childhood settings are essential because they create the emotional security children need to learn, grow, and thrive. When children feel safe and connected to trusted adults, they are more confident in exploring their environment, trying new things, and forming positive relationships with others. These early bonds support brain development, emotional regulation, and social competence.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Educators greet each child warmly, speak to them at their eye level, and respond promptly to emotional needs with patience and care. Children feel safe, seen, and valued.	Adults are rushed, distracted, or inconsistent in their responses. Comfort is delayed or dismissed. Children may feel insecure, anxious, or withdrawn. They struggle to self-regulate and may act out in an attempt to seek connection.
The daily routine is predictable, and adults consistently fulfill their promises and meet expectations. Children are comforted when they are upset and celebrated when they are successful.	Schedules are chaotic, adults ignore distress, or promises are frequently broken. Children may feel uncertain or unsafe. This can lead to clinginess, acting out, resistance, or emotional withdrawal.
Educators take time to learn about each child's interests, temperament, family, and culture. Interactions are personalized and affirming. Children feel known and respected.	Children are treated generically, with little attention to their individual needs or backgrounds. Children may feel invisible or misunderstood, which can affect their confidence and willingness to connect with others.

6. Children need caring and nurturing relationships with adults.

Advocacy Strategies

*potential for DEY mini-grant funding

1. Advocate for Low Adult-to-Child Ratios

- **Strategy:** Push for policies and funding that support smaller group sizes and lower ratios so adults can build meaningful connections with each child.
- **Suggestions:** Support legislation or funding proposals that prioritize quality early childhood care. *Educate families and stakeholders on how low ratios enhance emotional support and learning outcomes.

2. Promote Relationship-Based Practices

- **Strategy:** Encourage programs to center care around strong, consistent adult-child relationships as a core component of early learning.
- **Suggestions:** Advocate for continuity of care models, where the same caregiver is assigned over time. Encourage schools to incorporate relationship-building goals into their curricula and teacher evaluations.

3. Provide Training in Responsive Caregiving

- **Strategy:** Call for ongoing professional development that equips educators to build nurturing, respectful, and culturally responsive relationships.
- **Suggestions:** *Request or lead training on attachment, trauma-informed care, and social-emotional development. *Share resources and invite experts to speak on child-centered, emotionally supportive practices.

4. Encourage Family Engagement and Partnership

- **Strategy:** Promote strong partnerships between educators and families to support the child's emotional world, both at home and in care settings.
- **Suggestions:** Host family-teacher conferences that go beyond academics to focus on relationship-building. Create consistent, two-way communication about each child's emotional and developmental needs.

5. Speak Up for the Value of Care

- **Strategy:** Publicly affirm that emotional connection and caregiving are not "extras" but essential to early development.
- **Suggestions:** *Share real stories or data showing how strong adult-child bonds lead to better outcomes. Push back against rigid academic-only approaches that overlook the importance of relationships in the learning process.

6. Children need caring and nurturing relationships with adults.

Resources

Books

- ["The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need from Grownups"](#) by Erika Christakis
- ["Illuminating Care: The Pedagogy and Practice of Care in Early Childhood Communities"](#) by Carol Garboden Murray
- ["Reflection, Perspective-Taking, and Social Justice: Stories of Empathy and Kindness in the Early Childhood Classroom"](#) by Jacky Howell, Makai Kellogg, Magy Youssef, and Sabina Zeffler

Articles

- ["Fostering Healthy Social & Emotional Development in Young Children: Tips for Early Childhood Teachers and Providers"](#)- HUD
- ["DAP: Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners"](#)- NAEYC
- ["Building Positive Relationships in Early Childhood"](#)- Bright Wheel
- ["Tips on Helping Your Child Build Relationships"](#)- Zero to Three

Organizations

- [Zero to Three](#)
- [Circle of Security International](#)
- [Attachment and Trauma Network \(ATN\)](#)
- [Center on the Developing Child – Harvard University](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [@biglittlefeelings](#) (Instagram)
- [@responsiveclassroom](#) (Instagram)
- ["Unruffled"](#) by Janet Lansbury (Podcast)
- ["The Brain Architects"](#) – Harvard Center on the Developing Child (Podcast)

7. Children need agency over their learning.

What We Believe

We believe that children need agency over their learning because it empowers them to be curious, capable, and engaged thinkers. When children are given meaningful choices and the freedom to follow their interests, they develop confidence, independence, and a sense of ownership in the learning process. Agency is not about letting children do whatever they want—it’s about trusting them as active participants in their own development.

Why This is Important

Agency in early childhood settings supports deeper learning, motivation, and problem-solving. When children are encouraged to make decisions, ask questions, and influence how they explore, they become more invested in their experiences. This builds critical thinking, creativity, and self-regulation. Without agency, children may feel disconnected, controlled, or unmotivated, which can hinder emotional and cognitive growth.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Educators provide open-ended materials and follow the child’s lead during play, asking thoughtful questions rather than giving instructions. Children feel empowered and excited to explore.	Play is often tightly structured or overly adult-directed, leaving little room for children to make choices. Children may feel bored or stifled. They lose interest and rely on adults to direct their actions.
Children choose between activities, materials, or topics to explore. Their opinions shape various aspects of the daily routine and classroom projects. Children feel respected and capable.	Children are expected to follow adult-planned activities with minimal input or autonomy. Children may feel powerless or disengaged, which can lead to resistance, passivity, or low motivation.
Educators treat children's ideas as valuable, solicit their input, and encourage them to solve problems in their own unique ways. Children feel their thoughts matter. They develop persistence, initiative, and higher-level thinking.	Adults quickly intervene, correct, or override children’s ideas instead of letting them explore solutions. Children may feel discouraged or dependent on adults for answers, missing opportunities to build self-confidence.

7. Children need agency over their learning.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Promote Emergent and Inquiry-Based Curriculum

- **Strategy:** Support approaches that allow children's interests to guide learning experiences.
- **Suggestions:** Advocate for flexible, child-centered planning rather than rigid, one-size-fits-all curricula. Encourage project work that evolves from children's questions and ideas.

2. Educate Adults on the Power of Choice

- **Strategy:** Raise awareness among educators and families about the benefits of choice in supporting learning and development.
- **Suggestions:** *Share examples and research on the benefits of child agency. *Offer workshops or newsletters that demonstrate how simple daily choices can empower children.

3. Create Environments that Invite Exploration

- **Strategy:** Design learning spaces that encourage independence, curiosity, and open-ended interaction.
- **Suggestions:** Provide accessible materials and areas where children can explore freely. Reduce unnecessary rules or restrictions that limit initiative.

4. Model Respect for Children's Thinking

- **Strategy:** Show others how to listen to, validate, and build on children's ideas and problem-solving.
- **Suggestions:** Document and share children's learning journeys, highlighting their choices and thinking. Use language that reflects curiosity and respect rather than control.

5. Advocate for Assessment That Honors Agency

- **Strategy:** Push for assessment tools and practices that recognize how children learn through self-directed exploration.
- **Suggestions:** Support observational and portfolio-based assessment over standardized testing. Emphasize growth, creativity, and engagement over compliance or performance.

7. Children need agency over their learning.

Resources

Books

- [“Segregation by Experience: Agency, Racism, and Learning in the Early Grades”](#) by Jennifer Keys Adair and Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove
- [“From Teaching to Thinking: A Pedagogy for Reimagining Our Work”](#) by Ann Pelo, Margie Carter
- [“Really Seeing Children”](#) by Deb Curtis
- [“Learning Together with Young Children”](#), Second Edition by Margie Carter, Deb Curtis

Articles

- [“The Pedagogy of Listening”](#)- Carla Rinaldi
- [“Children’s Voices Matter: 5 Ways to Support Young Children’s Agency”](#)- Play Matters Australia
- [“Why Developing Decision-Making Skills at a Young Age Is Important”](#) - Wellspring Center for Prevention
- [“Maker-Centered Learning Playbook for Early Childhood Education”](#)- Project Zero

Organizations

- [Reggio Children](#)
- [Honoring Childhood](#)
- [The Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#)
- [Project Zero](#)- Harvard Graduate School of Education

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Peter Gray](#) (Substack)
- [That Early Childhood Nerd](#) (Podcast)
- [@wunderledteaching](#) (Instagram)
- [@reggiochildreninspired](#) (Instagram)

8. Children need ample time outdoors.

What We Believe

We believe that children need ample time outdoors because nature-rich environments support healthy physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Outdoor time offers space to move, explore, imagine, and connect with the world in ways that indoor settings can’t replicate. It promotes curiosity, well-being, and a deep sense of wonder—key elements of high-quality, whole-child development.

Why This is Important

Time outdoors is essential in early childhood because it nurtures development in all domains. Fresh air and physical activity strengthen the body and reduce stress, while nature-based play boosts creativity, problem-solving skills, and attention. Outdoor experiences also foster social skills, resilience, and a connection to the environment. Without regular outdoor time, children may become overstimulated, disengaged, or miss key developmental opportunities tied to movement and nature exploration.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Children spend significant time outside each day, regardless of the weather (with proper gear). Outdoor play is seen as valuable—not just a break from indoor learning. Children are energized, focused, and joyful.	Outdoor time is often limited, skipped due to behavioral reasons, or viewed as a luxury rather than a necessity. Children become restless or disengaged.
Learning activities are extended outdoors—children observe insects, measure puddles, draw with sidewalk chalk, or build with sticks and rocks. Children are highly engaged and curious.	Learning stays confined to the classroom, with little flexibility to take activities or lessons outside. Children may lose interest, feel restricted, or disconnect from the natural world around them.
Outdoor areas feature natural elements such as logs, hills, mud kitchens, or gardens that encourage climbing, building, and creative play. Children gain confidence, problem-solving skills, and a deeper awareness of their environment and abilities.	Playgrounds are overly controlled, overly safe, or limited in variety, with few open-ended materials or sensory opportunities. Children may feel bored or overly cautious. They miss chances to test their limits and develop resilience.

8. Children need ample time outdoors.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Highlight the Developmental Benefits of Nature Play

- **Strategy:** Educate others about how outdoor time supports whole-child development, from gross motor skills to emotional regulation.
- **Suggestions:** Share articles, videos, or research that links outdoor play to brain development and overall well-being. *Host a parent/community night focused on “why outdoor learning matters.”

2. Advocate for Daily Outdoor Time as a Non-Negotiable

- **Strategy:** Push for policies and routines that guarantee outdoor play is prioritized—not skipped due to academic pressure, punishment, or convenience.
- **Suggestions:** Collaborate with administrators to build protected outdoor time into the daily schedule. Encourage weather-appropriate gear to make outdoor time possible throughout the year.

3. Support Naturalized Outdoor Environments

- **Strategy:** Encourage the development of outdoor spaces that go beyond basic playgrounds and invite exploration.
- **Suggestions:** Consider incorporating natural materials, garden beds, loose parts, and shade structures into outdoor play areas. Fundraise, apply for grants, and partner with local community organizations to enhance outdoor spaces and improve the quality of life for all.

4. Embed Outdoor Learning in the Curriculum

- **Strategy:** Encourage educators to extend core learning outdoors across subjects.
- **Suggestions:** Share lesson plans or ideas for outdoor math, literacy, science, and art. Provide training or planning time to help educators confidently teach outside the classroom.

5. Partner with Families and the Community

- **Strategy:** Work with families to support outdoor experiences both at school and at home.
- **Suggestions:** Organize outdoor family events, such as nature walks or garden days. *Share tips for outdoor play at home, especially in urban or limited-space areas.

8. Children need ample time outdoors.

Resources

Books

- ["The Great Outdoors: Advocating for Natural Spaces for Young Children"](#) by Mary S. Rivkin
- ["Natural Playscapes"](#) by Rusty Keeler
- ["Nature-Based Learning for Young Children: Anytime, Anywhere, on Any Budget"](#) by Julie Powers and Sheila Williams Ridge
- ["Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens: The Handbook for Outdoor Learning"](#) by David Sobel

Articles

- ["Why Outdoor Play Is Essential for Healthy Development"](#) – NAEYC
- ["The Benefits of Outdoor Play in Early Childhood Development"](#) – Children's Museum of Sonoma County
- ["Outdoor Play Benefits"](#) – Head Start
- ["How to Protect Kids from Nature-Deficit Disorder"](#) - Greater Good Magazine

Organizations

- [Children & Nature Network](#)
- [Association for Nature-Based Education \(ANBE\)](#)
- [North American Association for Environmental Education \(NAAEE\)](#)
- [Natural Start Alliance](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Nature Preschool Community](#) (Facebook Group)
- [Discovery Natural Learning Center](#) (Facebook)
- [@thehighlanderschoolatl](#) (Instagram)
- [@rustykeeler](#) (Instagram)
- [@unearthingjoy](#) (Instagram)

9. Children need opportunities to develop self-control, self-regulation, and executive function.

What We Believe

We believe that children need opportunities to develop self-control, self-regulation, and executive function, as these foundational skills support optimal whole-child development, healthy relationships, and long-term success. These abilities help children manage their emotions, make thoughtful choices, plan ahead, and adapt to challenges. Nurturing these skills early on allows children to thrive both in school and in life.

Why This is Important

Developing self-regulation and executive function in early childhood is essential because it lays the groundwork for future academic learning and social-emotional well-being. Skills like impulse control, focus, memory, and flexible thinking enable children to engage in group settings, follow routines, solve problems, and persist through frustration. When early environments prioritize emotional regulation and skill-building over rote instruction, children are better equipped to learn and grow.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
Educators model calming strategies, validate emotions, and guide children through big feelings with empathy and consistency. Children feel safe, understood, and learn how to manage their emotions over time.	Adults expect children to "calm down" or "use their words" without support, or react punitively to emotional outbursts. Children may feel ashamed, confused, or unable to cope, which can lead to repeated outbursts or shutdowns.
Games like "Simon Says," pretend play, or building with blocks encourage focus, memory, and flexible thinking. Children develop cognitive control in fun, developmentally appropriate ways. They learn to plan, adjust, and persist.	Time for open-ended play is reduced or replaced with passive learning and strict routines. Children have fewer chances to practice thinking skills. They may struggle with impulse control or problem-solving.
Daily routines are consistent, with visual cues and clear transitions that help children anticipate what's next. Children feel more secure and independent. They learn how to manage time and transitions with growing confidence.	Schedules are chaotic, inconsistent, or overly rigid, leaving children unsure or overwhelmed. Children may act out or withdraw due to stress, confusion, or a lack of internal regulation tools.

9. Children need opportunities to develop self-control, self-regulation, and executive function.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Advocate for Time and Space to Develop These Skills Before Academic Demands

- **Strategy:** Push back against early academic pressure and emphasize the importance of foundational self-regulation skills.
- **Suggestions:** *Share developmental research that shows why executive function must come before formal instruction. Encourage school leaders to prioritize play, routines, and emotional support in early learning standards.

2. Promote Play-Led, Brain-Building Activities

- **Strategy:** Support activities that naturally develop focus, memory, and flexibility through movement, music, and pretend play.
- **Suggestions:** Provide examples of executive function games to families and staff. Advocate for schedules that protect time for unstructured child-led free play and guided reflection.

3. Encourage Trauma-Informed, Emotionally Responsive Practices

- **Strategy:** Educate educators and caregivers about how emotional support fosters regulation and resilience.
- **Suggestions:** *Offer training in co-regulation, calming strategies, and connection-based discipline. Highlight the long-term benefits of helping children feel emotionally safe.

4. Support Predictable, Child-Centered Routines

- **Strategy:** Promote classroom environments that use consistent routines and visual supports to help children succeed.
- **Suggestions:** Share best practices for routines and transitions with school leaders or caregivers. Encourage visual schedules and child-led transitions.

5. Advocate for Professional Development Focused on Executive Function

- **Strategy:** Ensure educators understand how executive function develops and how to nurture it through everyday practice.
- **Suggestions:** Suggest professional development focused on early brain development, behavior, and regulation. Emphasize practical strategies that educators can apply in their daily interactions with children.

9. Children need opportunities to develop self-control, self-regulation, and executive function.

Resources

Books

- [“Executive Function & Child Development”](#) by Marcie Yeager and Daniel Yeager
- [“Smart but Scattered”](#) by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare
- [“Nurturing Self-Regulation in Early Childhood: Adopting an Ethos and Approach”](#) by Tamsin Grimmer, Wendy Geens
- [“Tools of the Mind: The Vygotskian Approach to Early Childhood Education”](#) by Elena Bodrova and Deborah Leong

Articles

- [“Self-Regulation and Executive Function: Responsive and Informed Practices for Early Childhood”](#) – NAEYC
- [“A Guide to Executive Function”](#) – Harvard University Center on the Developing Child
- [“Building Executive Function Skills Through Games: The Power of Playful Learning”](#) – NAEYC
- [“Executive Function in Early Childhood”](#) – The Education Hub

Organizations

- [Tools of the Mind](#)
- [Egg- The Proven Toolkit for Building Lifelong Resilience and Focus](#)
- [Child Mind Institute](#)
- [Center on the Developing Child – Harvard University](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Focus Forward: An Executive Function Podcast](#)
- [Calm and Connected – Episode 106: Executive Function for Kids and Teens](#)
- [@childmindinstitute](#) (Instagram)
- [@developingchildhavard](#) (Instagram)

10. Children need space to fail and struggle so they can learn to persist and try again.

What We Believe

We believe that children need space to fail and struggle because it helps them develop persistence, problem-solving skills, and resilience. Learning doesn’t happen without challenge, and early experiences with effort, frustration, and retrying build the foundation for a growth mindset. Struggle is not a sign of failure—it’s a critical part of how children learn to keep going.

Why This is Important

Allowing children to experience and work through challenges in early childhood supports the development of perseverance, confidence, and independence. When children are supported—not rescued—through frustration, they learn that effort matters more than immediate success. These skills are essential for lifelong learning, coping with setbacks, and navigating relationships. In environments where struggle is avoided or seen as negative, children may develop a fear of failure, low self-esteem, or a lack of motivation to try new things.

✓ What it looks like when we get it right.	✗ What it feels like when we get it wrong.
An educator observes a child trying to build a tall tower that keeps falling. Instead of fixing it, the adult offers encouragement and asks open-ended questions, such as, “What do you think would help it stay up?”	The adult quickly steps in and builds the tower for the child to avoid frustration. The child misses a learning opportunity and may feel incapable or dependent on adult help.
Educators openly talk about mistakes and model how to recover from them (“Oops, I spilled the water—let’s clean it up together!”). Children see that mistakes are expected and manageable. They become more willing to take risks and learn from errors.	Mistakes are treated with criticism or embarrassment, or children are discouraged from trying again. Children may fear failure, avoid challenges, or give up easily when faced with something that feels difficult.
Children are given time to complete puzzles or tasks independently, and afterward, they’re invited to reflect on what worked and what didn’t. Children take pride in their efforts, developing self-awareness and resilience.	Tasks are rushed or adult-controlled, with little room for exploration or trial-and-error. Children may become passive or anxious, feeling pressure to get things “right” rather than to learn through the process.

10. Children need space to fail and struggle so they can learn to persist and try again.

Advocacy Strategies

**potential for DEY mini-grant funding*

1. Promote a Growth Mindset Culture

- **Strategy:** Advocate for environments that celebrate effort, perseverance, and progress—not just outcomes or “correct” answers.
- **Suggestions:** Share language that promotes a growth mindset (“You worked hard on that!”) with staff and families. Encourage recognition systems that reward effort and resilience.

2. Educate About the Value of Productive Struggle

- **Strategy:** *Share research showing how challenge builds brain connections and independence.
- **Suggestions:** Document and share real-life examples of how children grow from difficult tasks.

3. Encourage Risk-Taking and Open-Ended Challenges

- **Strategy:** Support curriculum and classroom practices that include hands-on, open-ended experiences where children face and work through difficulties.
- **Suggestions:** Advocate for loose parts play, STEM problem-solving, and art projects with no “right” answer. Push back on overly scripted or outcome-focused lessons.

4. Support Emotion Coaching and Co-Regulation

- **Strategy:** Promote emotional support strategies that help children manage frustration and stay engaged with challenges.
- **Suggestions:** Train educators and families in co-regulation techniques. Encourage responses like “It’s okay to feel frustrated—let’s figure this out together.”

5. Protect Time for Deep Engagement and Independent Effort

- **Strategy:** Advocate for schedules and environments that allow children time to engage deeply with tasks—even when they struggle.
- **Suggestions:** Push for longer learning blocks and less rushed transitions. Recommend fewer interruptions so children can stay focused and work through challenges at their own pace.

10. Children need space to fail and struggle so they can learn to persist and try again.

Resources

Books

- [“Not Yet . . . And That’s OK: How Productive Struggle Fosters Student Learning”](#) by Peg Grafwallner
- [“Promoting Resilience in Preschoolers”](#) by Karen B. Cairone and Mary Mackrain’
- [“Raising Resilient Kids: 8 Principles for Bringing Up Healthy, Happy, Successful Children Who Can Overcome Obstacles and Thrive Despite Adversity”](#) by Rhonda Spencer-Hwang
- [“Cultivating Resilience in Early Childhood: A Practical Guide to Support the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Young Children”](#) by Louise Jackson

Articles

- [“Teaching Students to Use Failures Productively in Pre-K”](#) – Edutopia
- [“How to Help Kids Learn to Fail”](#) – Child Mind Institute
- [“Building Resilience in Children and Families”](#) – Sesame Workshop
- [“Building Resilience in Children 3-8 Years”](#) – Raising Children Network

Organizations

- [Center for Resilient Children](#)
- [Sesame Workshop](#)
- [Conscious Discipline](#)
- [Fostering Resilience](#)

People, Podcasts, Social Media

- [Getting Out of Children's Way Builds Resilience](#) (Podcast)
- [The Verywell Mind Podcast](#) – Episode: How to Teach Kids Resilience With Actress Cobie Smulders
- [@theconsciouskid](#) (Instagram)
- [Hidden Brain Podcast](#) - Episode: Kinder Gardening



**DEY
ADVOCACY
CAMPAIGNS**

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

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.

Sign On Here

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. Today 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.

Sign On Here



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. Overreliance on teacher-directed activities.
10. Standardized academic assessments.

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

1. Learning about child development.
2. Evaluate policies, practices, and curriculums and get rid of those that are not based on principles of child development.
3. Listen to early childhood educators and parents.
4. Remove all academic assessments for children under age 12.
5. 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.

[Sign On Here](#)