

Preparing Young Children for Accelerated Learning with Strong Early Childhood Learning Opportunities

Why are Strong Early Childhood Learning Opportunities Important?

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted typical early childhood education and learning for all young children in Michigan and throughout the world. As the pandemic begins to subside, educators are turning their attention to supporting children whose opportunities have been disrupted. Like older students, young children will thrive when provided with appropriate experiences, strong foundational instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations (Rollins, 2014). Educators and policy makers who understand the developmental strengths and needs of young children can make decisions that stimulate student learning.

Consider the Effects of Trauma

Young children continue to grow, develop, and learn no matter their situation. While each context provides more or less support, children are constantly learning from every experience. Unfortunately, for many young children, the pandemic created less than optimal situations whether related to a lack of in-person learning opportunities, social isolation, resource scarcity, or family/caregiver stressors.

Children in poverty and children of color are even more likely to have experienced disruption to services or negative situations (Bryant et al., 2020).

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur during childhood. According to the [Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#), experiencing ACEs can lead to poor academic achievement and, without the intervention of a supportive adult, to toxic stress (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012). The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) provides expanded information on individual, family, and community risk factors as well as protective factors.

What is Accelerated Learning?

Too often students with perceived academic gaps are put into remediation classes. Their access to grade-level content is delayed until all their academic gaps are filled. Research has shown again and again that this does not work (Rollins, 2014). Instead, learning should be accelerated. Accelerated learning keeps students moving forward on their intended grade-level trajectories by strategically preparing them for success in current grade-level content.

Acceleration prepares students for new learning combined with “just-in-time” teaching of missing key skills and concepts in the purposeful context of current lessons.

Opportunities to accelerate learning rely on robust Tier 1 instruction that includes grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations for students. This robust instruction should be enhanced with supports targeted to the skills and services students need to stay on grade level.

Recent research has documented the increase in ACEs during the pandemic ([Bryant et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, it is more vital than ever that students receive individualized support tailored to their current level of development across domains. **Attempting to bypass children's needs to meet adult-determined, content-driven pacing structures and timeframes will slow the recovery process and result in further disconnects between child development and adult expectations.** This approach works against the concept of accelerated learning as a strategy.

Michigan's Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten

As children enter or return to classrooms, preschool programs should look to Michigan's [Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten](#) (ECSQ-PK). The ECSQ-PK informs educators about standards for high-quality programs and early learning expectations for three- and four-year-old children "meant to emphasize significant content appropriate for preschoolers at this very special time in their lives, to protect them from an underestimation of their potential and from the pressure of academic work meant for older children." The standards provide research-based developmental trajectories for early learning and are aligned to the [Michigan Academic Standards](#). The ECSQ-PK illustrates early learning expectations in all domains of child development and provides examples of the typical pathway children follow to achieve learning within each domain. Using this document, children are provided an opportunity to have a great start on their developmental path.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The focus for early childhood educators should be on [developmentally appropriate practice](#) as defined by the National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC). Early childhood educators utilizing the NAEYC core considerations will recognize the context in which children learn while providing unique experiences based on the individual needs of each child.

Guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice include:

- Creating a caring, equitable community of learners.
- Engaging in and fostering reciprocal partnerships with families and community.
- Observing, documenting, and assessing children's development and learning.
- Teaching to enhance each individual child's development and learning.
- Planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals.
- Demonstrating professionalism as an early childhood educator.

K-3 Components of Quality for Classroom Environments

K-3 programs should rely on Michigan's [K-3 Components of Quality for Classroom Environments \(components\)](#). This document aligns to the program standards within the ECSQ-PK and to the NAEYC developmentally appropriate practices. It states:

Developing positive relationships and experiencing quality early education are so vital to future success that researchers and practitioners have spent over two decades researching and refining implementation standards around best practices for our youngest learners.

Further, the components detail the essential qualities of an effective learning environment that foster active, unhurried, and purposeful learning, which allow for dramatic play, the arts, unstructured time outdoors, and plentiful opportunities for social-emotional learning and development (Zosh et al., 2017, Hassinger-Das et al., 2019). Teaching practices are to be rooted in exploration, manipulation, investigation, and discovery. Additional components recognize and emphasize the critical importance of family engagement and the process by which children transition into kindergarten. Children learn best when the environment, curriculum, and teaching practices are developmentally appropriate. The components present clear guidance for K-3 teachers and administrators seeking to ensure that their classrooms provide these elements.

MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework

Further support for engaging families is available within the [MiFamily: Michigan's Family Engagement Framework](#). Within the framework, the Michigan Department of Education defines family engagement as "a collaborative relationship between families, educators, providers, and partners to support and improve the learning, development, and health of every learner." Charts included in the framework allow schools to consider the impact level of current family engagement efforts and to provide ideas for modifying them to achieve greater results.

Appropriate Assessment in Early Childhood

Finally, a comprehensive understanding of each child's development across domains ensures that educators are able to target classroom environments, experiences, and interactions to meet children's immediate needs and build on their strengths. As classrooms and programs reopen, developmental screening tools may prove valuable and effective in providing the means for appropriately identifying children in need of more support, services, or additional diagnostic assessments. Whole-child formative assessment will also be critical. The careful assessment of each child's development and learning must be purposefully undertaken and is necessary for intentional teaching and preparing the learning environment. Ideal practice includes on-going, observation-based assessment that allows children to demonstrate knowledge and skills through authentic means. A recent [FutureEd report](#) on early learning

during the pandemic refers to teacher observations as “essential to measuring learning and social-emotional development in young children.”

Domain-specific standardized testing is largely inappropriate for young children and should be avoided for multiple reasons. A report by the [National Research Council of the National Academies](#) discusses the lack of an established, trusting relationship with the tester, as well as feelings of insecurity due to the environment or testing situation, uncertainty regarding testing methods, limited proficiency in the language used during the assessment, and length of time required for testing as just a few of the factors that may greatly diminish the reliability and validity of standardized testing of young children. Pull-out or pull-aside testing can intensify stress levels, eliminate the benefits of a consistent classroom schedule, and remove a trusted adult from the entire group of children. Also, this type of testing of children frequently ignores important social-emotional elements and does not allow children to best demonstrate their knowledge and skills. A myopic focus on a discrete area or set of skills increases the risk of well-intentioned, yet inappropriate instructional practices. Both documents referenced above offer additional guidance regarding child assessment practices.

Social Emotional Learning Roadmap

The [SEL \(social emotional learning\) Roadmap](#) from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) offers schools four Critical Practices for deepening social and emotional competencies and creating equitable learning environments. The four practices include: cultivating and deepening relationships; providing opportunities for adults to connect and heal; creating safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments; and using data to improve support for children, families, and staff. Each practice includes three to five strategies with multiple tools suggested for each strategy. For example, under the first practice, one strategy is to create a coalition and integrate SEL into school reopening plans. The roadmap on the website linked above also provides additional tools from CASEL as well as references from other organizations to support the strategies.

Conclusion

Young children must be given opportunities to explore, play, and develop in the ways that they learn best. All students would benefit from these strategies, but it is vital that young children receive transition support as they move in and out of early childhood programs and the early elementary grades (including the before/after/summer periods). It is equally important that they have opportunities to develop strong relationships with caring adults, that they have time to process their experiences, and that they receive adult support of their social-emotional development. For young children, there is no shortcut to learning.

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Resources

[*The Connection: Michigan Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten and the WIDA Early English Language Development Standards*](#)

[*Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools Across Two Decades: An Interdisciplinary Review of Research*](#)

[*NAEYC \(National Association for the Education of Young Children\). 2020. Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC.*](#)

[*TOUGH TEST: THE NATION'S TROUBLED EARLY LEARNING ASSESSMENT LANDSCAPE \(March 2021\)*](#)

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