



Seven Steps to Effective Early Childhood Education Programming

A child's education begins long before kindergarten.

Principal- Early Childhood- Web Exclusive » Volume 87 Number 5, May/June 2008

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As former teachers of preschool, kindergarten, and first grade, we were confident that we possessed the skills and knowledge to lead Morris Early Childhood Center, a pre-K-1 school in Delaware. What we found, however, is that every day in the principal's office was a learning experience for both of us. We can't imagine how much more difficult it would have been had we not already worked with small children.

We realize that our status as principals who once taught kindergarten puts us in a very small minority, and that many principals feel less adequately prepared than us to recognize, establish, support, and supervise quality early childhood education programs.

Anyone who works with young children will tell you, "Kindergarten isn't what it used to be." But what is it now? And what *should* it be? How do you, as a principal, recognize and support quality early childhood curricula, materials, assessments, teaching, and learning?

Getting on the Right Track—and Staying There

The National Association of Elementary School Principals' publication, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do* (2005), outlines seven characteristics that mark high-quality early childhood education programs.

Supportive interactions between teachers and children. Remember the old question, "Would you rather your students like you or respect you?" For young children, this is not an either-or proposition. Young children want to like their teachers and principals, just as they want to learn. They cannot separate liking someone from respecting him or her no more than they can separate liking their teachers from liking school. The heart of the early childhood experience is strong relationships enhanced by supportive interactions. In the early childhood classroom (and any classroom), the students should like school and enjoy being there.

Our own experiences working with many young children over the course of the past 20 years inform our belief that effective early childhood teachers (and principals) stand out in their understanding and use of supportive communications. These educators realize that quite often what you say is less important than how you say it. Even young children can pick up messages buried in one's tone of voice or facial expressions. Think, for example, about how many different ways you can say the words, "Well, Kenny, it sure is great to see you back at school today."

Of course, not all communications are handled through words. Much is conveyed through actions. For example, most young children want and need positive human touch, and most enjoy hugging the adults in their lives. At Morris, that could amount to a great many hugs on any given school day! To keep children from running across their classrooms, stepping out of their lines, or jumping up from their lunch tables in hopes of hugging a nearby adult, we devised the Morris Wave. By wiggling one index finger in a silent greeting, accompanied by a smile, we tell a child, "This is like getting a hug from across the room." In this way, we acknowledge the child's need for attention and affection without interrupting whatever else is going on.

Safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments. As building leaders, our first responsibility is to ensure the safety of each person working and learning in our schools. Once safety is established, we may move on to establish supportive and engaging learning environments that empower children to learn about the world around them by allowing them to actively participate in it.

We were fortunate to work in a building that was designed with small children in mind. We realize that few principals share that luxury and lack budgets to provide improvements or even to acquire appropriately sized furniture. But establishing a productive classroom environment for young children does not have to be an expensive proposition. More important than having the right chairs and tables is making sure the learning materials are appropriate and engaging. A classroom rich with natural materials like seashells, leaves, plants, wood, and even containers of dirt makes for a child-friendly space filled with nature's beauty and wonder at a relatively low cost.

While your early childhood classrooms may well have the same materials on the shelves in May that were there in September, it's the quality of engagement with those materials that needs to change through the course of the year. For example, what children can accomplish with a set of ABC blocks at the end of the school year will look quite different than what they were doing with them eight or nine months earlier. Throughout the year, prominent displays of children's ever-evolving artwork and writing, rich with colors and mixed media, help children lay claim to their learning space, understand the value of completing a project, and cultivate genuine pride.

Over the years, we came to realize that children are able to comprehend even complex concepts if they are presented in concrete terms, or at least by comparing them to things they already understand. When we were looking for a way to make our monthly citizenship awards something that our first graders could both understand and want to earn, we began calling it our Good Friends program. While few 6-year-olds can define what good citizenship is, all of them can explain what it means to be a good friend.

Meaningful learning for the individual child. Students will arrive at your elementary school as kindergartners, or even as preschoolers, who possess and demonstrate an incredibly wide array of skills and knowledge. In any given kindergarten class, a teacher can have a child who is already decoding and comprehending text sitting next to a child who has never held a pair of scissors or who cannot recognize even one letter in his or her first name. Because these children will soon be held to the same standards, their instruction must be varied, appropriate, and meaningful.

Just as supportive interactions are the heart of the early childhood learning experience, purposeful play is its brain. It is through play that children have opportunities to sharpen a sense of exploration, expand on a capacity for creative thinking, use problem-solving abilities, and further develop their language and social skills, all of which foster their development as individuals and ultimately prepare them for social and academic success.

For example, teachers at Morris have learned to get great mileage from what we 20th-century kindergarten teachers called the housekeeping center. No longer is this space used simply for "dress up" and to "play house." Now it's used to meaningfully reflect, extend, and support specific units of study. When our kindergartners study dinosaurs, they can pretend to manage a natural history museum. When they study transportation, they can work at or patronize a service garage or gas station. When they study holidays, they can wrap packages, prepare greeting cards, address envelopes, and design postage stamps.

Focus on the whole child. In our information-rich era, it is more critical than ever that school leaders remain mindful of children as individual human beings and not simply collections of data points, particularly test data. A well-developed early childhood approach seeks to understand and develop the whole child, including social, emotional, physical, and academic growth.

For young children, things that can seem trivial to adults—like the worry of knowing you left your library book at home, or the excitement of wanting to show off your new purple plastic purse—can detract from learning. Remember to dignify children's concerns; something as simple as, "Wow! I'd love to hear more about that at snack time" will let children know that you are listening to them and are responsive to their concerns.

Early childhood educators understand that the social curriculum, though still largely unwritten, is just as important as the academic curriculum and just as deserving of daily instruction. But in teaching social skills to young children, we need to remain mindful of

their levels of development. Few 4-, 5-, and 6-year-olds have developed a moral sense beyond a black-and-white understanding of right and wrong. Much of their behavior, however, falls into shades of gray that adults can recognize but young children cannot.

For example, if Jack tells you Jill was running in the hallway, is that tattling? As adults, we must be the ones to decide if a report is a tattle, as well as the quality of the response. The true danger lies in the unspoken messages adults send children when responding, or failing to respond, to their concerns.

A culture of authentic assessment and continuous learning. When assessing the skills and knowledge of a young learner, let common sense be your guide. If you want to know how high he can count, ask him to count. If you want to know if he can match letters to sounds, show him a letter and ask him to produce the sound. If you want to know if he can recite the alphabet, sort objects by specific attributes, or identify parts of the body, days of the week, or shapes and colors, simply ask him to do so.

Never underestimate the value of observing a child. If a teacher is concerned about a particular child's language development, for example, have the teacher or another observer listen to that child's spontaneous conversation as he or she plays, works, or eats. Anecdotal records of a child's mean length of utterance, sentence structure, and word choice in spontaneous conversation are unparalleled in their ability to inform language instruction.

Principals can enhance the quality of their early childhood programming by working with teachers to ensure vertical curriculum alignment. Even if your state or district does not yet have firmly established preschool curricula or standards, you can backtrack from what you do have. For example, in our district the upper elementary students used the four-square model of organizing material before writing. Soon, our first-grade teachers began using this model. Students would write a topic in the center of the four squares (*e.g.*, tigers) and then add a related fact in each of the four corners, such as habitat, food, enemies, and how their babies are born.

Our kindergarten teachers soon adapted this method, but the real genius of vertical alignment showed up in our pre-kindergarten classes, where the teacher placed a large paper with four squares on the floor, adding a purple marker, a purple crayon, a purple pencil, and a yellow pencil in its boxes. She then led a discussion about what the children observed, as well as which of the four items did not belong with the others and why. In just a few minutes, she was able to engage her students in vocabulary development, color recognition, and sorting.

Connections to families and community organizations. Children entering your early childhood programs will be arriving with a great variety of background experiences, which can include everything from elite private preschools to church programs to your local Head Start to a variety of in-home or other private day care settings.

An increasingly critical step in preparing children for success in formal schooling is direct and explicit outreach from schools to these early care providers. We can no longer afford to wait until children are at our door before we make contact with their families and other first teachers. Our experience is that while nearly all of them are sincere in their desire to adequately prepare their children for school, they may need some guidance and suggestions. When they know your kindergarten expectations and how to work toward them, they are usually more than happy to do so.

Picking up the phone to call the local Head Start, preschools, and day cares will take some time, but it is an investment that pays off almost immediately. Offer to send them materials, speak at their parent meetings, and sponsor student visits to your school so that their 4-year-olds can get a glimpse of what "big school" is like.

Effective administration. The principal who finds ways to support these first six characteristics is well on the way toward earning the label of early childhood advocate. A principal can further this reputation by being explicit with teachers about expectations, letting them know that sometimes the best lessons are not the ones on the pre-observation form or in a teacher's guide. Assure them that their opinions about early childhood teaching and learning are valuable, and should be shared with their colleagues. Send a clear and consistent message to your staff and your community that high-quality early childhood education is not

only important but is truly vital as we guide each child from small learner to big success.

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