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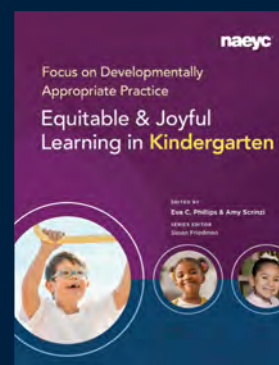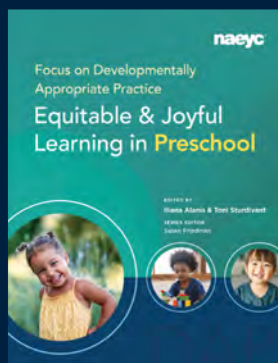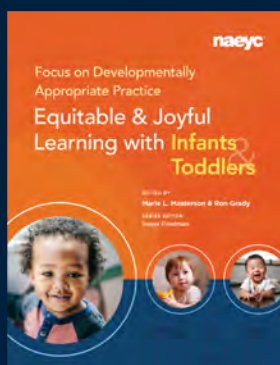Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8
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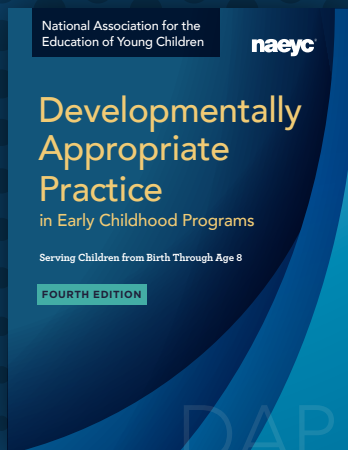
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Transforming Our Understanding of and Approaches to Children's Behaviors

Annie Moses
YC Editor in Chief

Many years ago, as a new intern in a kindergarten classroom, I observed a child grabbing a toy from another with a push and the words "That's mine!" There was nothing uncommon about the child's behavior in that particular moment—or my response. "Don't do that," I instructed. "That's not nice." The look on my mentor teacher's face was clear: I needed to understand and respond to children in a different way.

Guidance and behavior are two of the most popular and pressing topics on the minds of early childhood professionals. Even those well beyond their first years of teaching still seek perspectives and practical strategies on these topics. As I scan through the submissions we receive, the engagement with our content, the activity on NAEYC's HELLO discussion forum, and the results from a large-scale field survey by NAEYC, guidance and behavior are frequently written about, presented on, and sought after.

In this issue of *Young Children*, authors present the meaning behind children's behaviors and developmentally appropriate, equitable ways to respond to them. Some of these approaches may be new and require a change in thinking; some may be familiar but not fully integrated into everyday practice. All can be considered, including the always evolving research base, as educators engage in their journeys of professional growth. In fact, every issue of *Young Children* is a place to hone in on important topics and stay up-to-date on research as educators also think about application to their own settings.

In the opening article, "From Patience to Understanding: Shifting Mindsets to Address Challenging Behaviors," Ivonne E. Monje, Desirée Toldo, and Stefanie Horton demonstrate how a mindset of patience, or bearing with a child's behavior, is actually a deficit-based approach. Instead, they describe specific strategies that early childhood educators—on their own or in collaboration with others—can implement for more child-focused approaches.

"Trauma-Informed Early Learning Settings: Approaches to Building Resilience in Young Children," by Nicola Conners Edge, Karen S. Hickman, Melissa J. Sutton, Leslie Dudley Corbell, Khiela J. Holmes, and Elissa D. Wilburn, describes trauma-informed strategies responsive to children's social, emotional, and behavioral development, which can be applied in early learning settings serving children birth through kindergarten.

Along with principles and practices applicable across settings, early childhood educators and leaders also need information specific to the ages and contexts of the children they serve. In "Behavior Guidance with Infants and Toddlers: Strengthening Each Child's Sense of Belonging," Marie L. Masterson explains how educators can engage in behavior guidance to foster infants' and toddlers' sense of belonging.

Continuing the focus on ages and contexts, Sean Durham, Travis L. Morgan, and Ashton Bridges explore "Challenging Behavior or Age-Appropriate Play? Recognizing the Learning Possibilities of Toddlers' Schema Play." The authors explain what schema play entails, then illustrate through multiple scenarios how educators can better interpret and respond to toddlers' behavior.

Amy Blessing offers insights from her journey as a kindergarten teacher in "Supporting Self-Regulation and Autonomy in Kindergarten: One Teacher's Journey," which first appeared in *Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable and Joyful Learning in Kindergarten* (published by NAEYC). Accompanying this is "Creating Joyful Learning Within State and Local Standards," in which Blessing situates her intentional approach within the current context of teaching and learning.

Finally, Tarima Levine and Victoria Ozeir ask readers to consider a different lens through which to view and respond to behavior in "Understanding and Supporting Children's Behavior Through a Sensory Processing Lens." The authors provide an overview of the sensory patterns children may display, and they share how educators can implement supportive strategies informed by children's individual sensitivities and preferences.

I had some work to do in my own professional learning to better understand and respond to children's behaviors. Over the years, as a faculty member teaching early education courses and now as editor in chief of *Young Children*, I have benefited from staying up-to-date on the research behind important topics such as this one in my own readings, which include *Young Children*. I have no doubt that my younger self would have benefited from the insights and examples from this issue's authors. Whether you are just beginning your teaching career or well into it, I hope you find the articles in this issue useful as you reflect on and continue to sharpen your perspective and practices.

– Annie Moses

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From Patience to Understanding

Shifting Mindsets to Address Challenging Behaviors

Ivonne E. Monje, Desirée Toldo, and Stefanie Horton

Early childhood is a crucial period of development. It is the time when children learn to express and manage their emotions as they learn to interact with others (NAEYC 2020). Because these skills develop gradually, early childhood educators need to have developmentally appropriate expectations for children's behavior (Florez 2011). Children's social and emotional development and well-being are supported by educators who demonstrate responsive practices, develop positive relationships and interactions with the children in their care, and provide overall social and emotional supports (Fettig et al. 2022).

It is also true that this crucial period of development can feel challenging for educators, who without the proper supports may come to rely on patience as a way to cope and navigate through children's social and emotional needs. *Patience* is defined as bearing pains or trials calmly, without complaint. Yet when applied to early childhood educators, it "implies disrespect to the child because it is a condescending view that the patient person is somehow superior to the 'opposition' " (Weber-Schwartz 1987, 53). Too often, early childhood educators may rely on patience in navigating a challenging behavior rather than trying to identify

and understand that behavior's underlying causes or reasons. This is particularly true when educators feel stress related to their jobs and/or lack the resources and supports needed to address challenging behaviors (e.g., Friedman-Krause et al. 2014; Jeon et al. 2019).

When educators are equipped with the knowledge and practices to support children's social and emotional needs, children are more likely to experience healthy social and emotional well-being in their learning environments (Center on the Developing Child 2016). As early childhood education coaches, we (the authors) work with educators to increase their understanding of what motivates a child's challenging behavior. Through this understanding, educators are then able to consider new teaching practices that strengthen the social and emotional environments of their settings.

In this article, we outline four key strategies that we use in our coaching, then show how educators can implement them to shift from a stance of patience to truly understanding and responding to children's behaviors. This work can be done individually, in collaboration with colleagues, or by partnering with a coach. We base our recommendations on our experiences with the Sustaining the Mental Health Climate in Early Childhood project, led by the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute at the City University of New York (CUNY). Our coaching work is grounded in the Climate of Healthy Interactions for Learning and Development tool, a research-based, evidence-informed framework for assessing and supporting the ways in which adults promote the mental health environments of early childhood classrooms. It was developed by researchers at the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at the Yale University School of Medicine.

Strategies to Begin Shifting Mindsets

Three-year-old Tim, who usually engages in solitary play, takes a stack of magnetic tiles from his classmate, Lucy. She screams and swats at Tim, catching Ms. Gabrielle's attention. "Did she take that from you?" Ms. Gabrielle asks Tim as she quickly walks over to the children. "Lucy, did you do something to Tim?" She then begins to instruct the children on how to resolve their conflict.

Later, in conversation with her educational coach, Ms. Gabrielle shares her frustration and dwindling patience with the children's behavior. "I feel like we work with them on being able to talk to each other without yelling for me right away or hitting each other, but it never sticks," she says. "I don't know why they keep fighting."

In early learning settings, educators help to shape the environment through their interactions with children (Goodman et al. 2015). In our work, we ask what this environment looks like and focus on collaborating with educators in infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms to build their knowledge about child development; specifically, social and emotional development. This enables them to reflect on and align their expectations with theory and research and to consider each child's unique circumstances and needs from a strengths-based perspective (NAEYC 2020). Rather than relying on patience as a tool to cope with children's behaviors and needs—many of which are developmentally appropriate—they begin to ask, "What is underneath this behavior? What is the emotional root?" Educators also begin to examine their own biases: Are they assessing a child's behavior based on their own narratives about identity, race, gender, ability, and/or other aspects of young children (NAEYC 2019)?

When teachers embrace the idea that "challenging behaviors are a product of challenging circumstances, not challenging [children]," they begin to see a positive shift in their settings (Reyes et al. 2020, C.3). They begin to adopt a more child-centered approach that leads to improved outcomes for children. This work requires practice, knowledge building, reflection, and shifting dispositions, or ways of thinking and being (Aguilar 2013).

Through our work with early childhood educators, we have identified four strategies that teachers can use to more responsively understand and support children's social and emotional development rather than patiently "bearing with it." These are:

› Examining expectations

› Disrupting existing narratives

› Meeting children where they are

› Acknowledging the feelings that a child's behavior elicits, and helping children articulate their feelings

Following, we offer examples of these strategies in action and show how educators can use data collection, role-playing, and reflective analysis to begin shifting their mindsets from patience to understanding.

Examining Expectations

Ms. Gabrielle is in her first year as a lead teacher in a 3-year-old classroom at a center-based early childhood program. Her calm demeanor and even tone of voice wash over the classroom, even with the cacophony of children laughing, playing, and sometimes fighting to assert their independence over one another.

Ms. Gabrielle is frustrated about children's conflict-resolution skills. "They seem to be regressing," she tells her educational coach. However, after some careful consideration, she begins to examine her expectations: Is it developmentally appropriate to expect 3-year-olds to navigate conflicts independently?

Examining expectations in early childhood education is a vital process that encourages teachers to reflect on their beliefs about what children should know and be able to do at different ages and points in their development. Teachers often enter a classroom or program with preconceived notions shaped by their own experiences, training, or societal norms (NAEYC 2020). However, when expectations are misaligned with where children are in their development, it can lead to frustration—for both teachers and children (Riggleman & Morgan 2018).

Examining one's expectations can be done in many ways, including through focused observation and deep reflective practice. For example, as Ms. Gabrielle began to engage in more focused observations of her class to assess their social and emotional skill levels, she realized her expectations around conflict resolution did not align with the developmental realities of the children. They were still learning essential social skills like sharing and problem solving.

After reflecting on her observations, she noticed that children were not able to independently problem solve because they lacked the opportunities to practice conflict-resolution skills. By examining her expectations, Ms. Gabrielle was able to make adjustments that created a more supportive framework for learning. These included asking questions to understand children's needs (rather than making assumptions) and inviting children to offer their perspectives and ideas about how to resolve conflicts.

The impacts of this strategy extend beyond experiences in the immediate classroom or early learning setting. Children feel more competent and confident when they can meet achievable goals: When teachers align their expectations with where children are in their development and identify specific steps they can take to help children progress, they cultivate an environment that focuses on and promotes learning and growth. This, in turn, fosters a sense of agency and motivation (Darling-Hammond et al. 2019).

Such reflective practice reduces teachers' frustrations as they become better equipped to appreciate children's individual journeys. This holistic approach not only enhances the teacher-child relationship, it also nurtures an atmosphere that prioritizes growth over perfection, allowing children to thrive as they navigate their early education experiences.

Disrupting Existing Narratives

Disrupting existing narratives in early childhood education involves challenging the assumptions and stories that teachers hold about children's behaviors and capabilities (NAEYC 2019). Sometimes, teachers may interpret certain developmentally appropriate behaviors as aggressive, defiant, or disengaged and label them as indicators of a deficit in the child. Research has shown that this is particularly true for children of color, boys, and/or children with

disabilities. Such interpretations have significant and long-term implications for children and families (Gilliam & Reyes 2018; Boonstra 2021; Lee & Alonzo 2024).

Educators can begin disrupting these narratives by observing and transcribing children's interactions. By writing down descriptions of what they see and hear, teachers avoid embracing preconceived notions or assumptions that may impact their interpretations of what is happening. This kind of data collection makes it easier to identify narratives (like "children should be able to resolve conflict independently" or "frequent reminders by the teacher are a sign that children are not progressing") that can interfere with children's abilities to develop prosocial skills, which include problem solving.

For example, Ms. Gabrielle initially viewed children's conflicts as a sign of "regression." This was because they often needed reminders and support to navigate conflict independently. Her assumptions about children's behaviors were particularly visible when she observed Lucy swatting Tim during a play session. Rather than considering Lucy's frustration about Tim taking her magnetic tiles, Ms. Gabrielle assumed that a child with Tim's reserved demeanor would not initiate a social interaction. Instead, she focused on Lucy as the perceived perpetrator and directed her to apologize to Tim—even though Ms. Gabrielle had missed the beginning of the conflict.

To begin disrupting her narratives about why the children were not independently problem solving, Ms. Gabrielle began to transcribe the conflict interactions in her room. This allowed her to better understand the full contexts of these situations. By reflecting on her transcriptions, she was able to broaden her perspective, gather more accurate information, and identify the root causes leading to the challenging behaviors.

The impact of this strategy can be profound for both teachers and children. When teachers challenge their assumptions about children's behaviors, they become more attuned to the nuanced needs of their students (Vallotton et al. 2021). This shift creates space for teachers to consider the perspectives and needs of each child in their setting, ultimately allowing them to help children navigate their feelings and interactions more effectively. Disrupting existing narratives helps

to transform the educational climate, creating a more inclusive and understanding environment where all children can flourish (NAEYC 2019).

Meeting Children Where They Are

As Ms. Gabrielle begins to observe and record the conflict among children in her class, she realizes they haven't had many opportunities to develop problem-solving skills on their own. "I just keep telling them what to do," she says. "I haven't shown them how."

To understand the perspectives of each child and to model problem-solving strategies, she begins engaging in role-playing activities with colleagues. She practices language that will help children work toward more independence in this area ("Something has happened here. Can you tell me what happened? What do you think we should do?"). Upon reflection, she realizes "the children weren't actually regressing like I had thought. They just didn't have opportunities to practice resolving conflicts without my help."

As she integrates children's voices into the conflict-resolution process and encourages their participation, the children develop a greater sense of agency in solving their problems.

Children's behaviors communicate their needs and/or areas of growth (OHS 2024). Research shows that when they have opportunities to share their perspectives, they feel heard by their peers and begin to consider how their actions may impact others' feelings. This, in turn, allows them to begin solving conflicts (Fatahi et al. 2022).

By acting as the primary problem solver, Ms. Gabrielle was thwarting children's agency and opportunities to grow (Curby et al. 2022). For example, by directing children to apologize to one another without discussing the problem first, children were missing a chance to understand how their classmates might be feeling and to practice using language that could help them resolve future conflicts. After implementing some of Ms. Gabrielle's strategies, children began using problem-solving language both independently and with her support.

By observing and assessing children's social and emotional behaviors, teachers can tailor their approaches to meet a child's specific needs. Indeed, "knowing that responsibility and self-regulation develop with experience and time, educators consider how to foster such development in their interactions with each child and in their curriculum planning" (NAEYC 2020, 16). This practice creates a safe and supportive learning environment where children know they are valued and understood. As such, they are more likely to engage in learning activities, take risks, and develop self-confidence. This approach also encourages the development of social and emotional skills as children learn to express their needs and advocate for themselves in a supportive atmosphere.

Acknowledging Feelings

When children present challenging behaviors, educators can help them identify and label their feelings. This gives children the language they need to understand how they feel and to express themselves more clearly in the future (Denham et al. 2012; Ogren & Sandhofer 2021)—both of which can eventually reduce the underlying cause of the behavior (Dombro et al. 2020). Learning to identify feelings also builds a child's trust in the educator as someone who will understand, empathize, and help during difficult situations (NAEYC 2019).

For example, when Lucy swatted at Tim, Ms. Gabrielle missed the opportunity to acknowledge both children's feelings. As she reflected on her practices, she began to use phrases to help children articulate their emotions and needs more effectively ("I see you look sad. Something has happened here; can you tell me what happened?"). This kind of validation strengthens and reinforces healthy social and emotional interactions by normalizing a child's feelings and the practice of talking about them. It also strengthens the learning environment's dynamics and relationships: As teachers create a space where emotions are recognized and discussed openly, children learn language to express their feelings more effectively, which can reduce instances of conflict and misunderstandings (Stafford-Brizard 2024). Equipping children with essential social skills enables them to navigate their interactions with peers in a more empathetic and constructive way.

Teachers who are in tune with their own emotions are better equipped to manage classroom dynamics, respond to children's needs, and model emotional regulation (Stafford-Brizard 2024). Acknowledging and addressing their own emotional states help teachers build emotional resilience, which is essential in an early learning setting's high-stress situations (Córdova et al. 2023). Furthermore, when teachers model emotional awareness and regulation, they promote social and emotional learning by fostering a classroom climate where children feel safe to express their own feelings (Stafford-Brizard 2024). For example, by using a feelings wheel to identify her own emotions throughout the day, Ms. Gabrielle modeled how to effectively express emotions through a range of experiences. By making emotional awareness an integral part of her teaching practice, she was able to enhance both her own well-being and the emotional development of the children.

Conclusion

When early childhood educators move from "enduring" children's behaviors to seeking out and understanding the root causes, they begin to shift away from the belief that patience is a useful tool to cope with behavior they view as challenging. Instead, they start creating healthier, more joyful settings that embrace developmentally appropriate practice.

While we coach teachers through this process, educators can engage in this work on their own. To get started, we suggest reflecting on the following questions:

› What do I expect the children in my learning setting to know and be able to do at the beginning of the year and as the year progresses? Is it developmentally appropriate?

› Is there a narrative I have about a child that I might need to reconsider? Why?

› What are three basic needs of the children in my setting that may present as challenging behaviors?

› When a challenging behavior arises, do I first identify what the children are feeling, or do I address the behavior?

› What trends or patterns do I notice from my anecdotal observations that can help me identify the root cause of a child's behavior?

About the Authors

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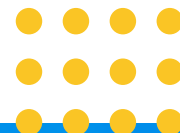
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Trauma-Informed Early Learning Settings

Approaches to Building Resilience in Young Children

Nicola Conners Edge, Karen S. Hickman, Melissa J. Sutton, Leslie Dudley Corbell, Khiela J. Holmes, and Elissa D. Wilburn

The effects of trauma on young children can be profound. They can include a shattered sense of safety, challenges in emotion regulation and cognition, loss of skills, heightened anxiety and depression, behavioral concerns, and difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships (Mongillo et al. 2009; Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010; Lieberman et al. 2011). Beginning in early childhood settings, children who exhibit behaviors related to the consequences of trauma have a greater risk of suspension and expulsion (Zeng et al. 2019). Because of this, they have an increased likelihood of being further traumatized by policies and practices that are punitive in nature (Carlson et al. 2016).

Early childhood educators, staff, and program leaders who are equipped with knowledge about childhood trauma can purposefully transform

routine interactions into meaningful and effective interventions. When trauma-informed approaches are implemented collaboratively and program-wide, educators and program leaders can create educational environments where children feel safe, supported, and ready to learn (NCTSN 2017). (See "The Importance of Organization-Wide, Trauma-Informed Care" below.)

We are a multidisciplinary team of authors who came together to collaborate on the development of Fostering Informed and Responsive Systems for Trauma: Early Care and Education (FIRST:ECE), a comprehensive, two-year program that supports trauma-informed approaches in early childhood education settings (UAMS 2024). A key component of FIRST:ECE is professional development for educators that includes training on five trauma-informed strategies, which we call the **5 Ss**. These strategies include supportive relationships, safety, self-regulation skills building, social skills building, and self-care for the educator. They can be applied in settings that serve children from birth to age 5.

In this article, we discuss the impacts of trauma on young children, outline the 5 Ss, and offer guidance on their implementation. We also share the story of Kaden, a 4-year-old boy who exhibited behaviors related to traumatic experiences. We discuss how his educators used and individualized the 5 Ss to support Kaden's resiliency.

Trauma in the Early Years

Trauma refers to events that exceed a person's ability to cope, resulting in lasting impacts on an individual's physical, emotional, or psychological well-being (SAMHSA 2014). Trauma can result from a variety of situations, such as accidents, exposure to violence, abuse and neglect, natural disasters, and more. Thirty percent of children experience at least one of these situations (see "A Snapshot of Children's Trauma-Related Exposure" on page 15).

> While trauma may affect children in many ways, teachers can foster resilience by intentionally noticing and building upon their and their families' strengths and capabilities.

The Importance of Organization-Wide, Trauma-Informed Care

We initially developed FIRST:ECE at the request of two Arkansas early childhood education organizations, which sought to strengthen their services for children and families impacted by trauma (Edge et al. 2022). First piloted in pre-K programs, it has been adapted and implemented in multiple settings that serve children from birth to 5. FIRST:ECE's programmatic approaches align with a framework developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, which was designed to "create a school-wide environment that addresses the needs of all students, staff, administrators, and families who might be at risk for experiencing traumatic stress symptoms" (NCTSN 2017, 2). The FIRST:ECE program is multipronged and includes coaching and resources to support systemwide changes to program environments, policies, and partnerships.

Intentional trauma-informed practices within early learning settings are critical; however, the implementation of trauma-informed care transcends one classroom or group. This process requires a program- or schoolwide shift in mindset that infuses principles like safety, transparency, and collaboration into every facet of the organization's culture (SAMHSA 2014). Common areas for organizational change include taking steps to support workplace wellness, reviewing policies, raising trauma awareness among staff, ensuring that the approaches to supporting children and families are culturally responsive, and developing community partnerships to support children and families (NCTSN 2017).

A Snapshot of Children's Trauma-Related Exposure

Thirty percent of children in the United States have experienced at least one potentially traumatic experience (CAHMI 2023). An estimated one in seven children will experience abuse or neglect in any given year, and approximately one in four children will experience maltreatment before reaching age 18 (CDC 2020). According to data from a national study, 27.3 percent of children who experienced maltreatment, abuse, and neglect were 2 years old and younger (HHS et al. 2024). Young children are also more likely to be exposed to domestic violence in their homes (Fantuzzo & Fusco 2007). Additionally, a study of 1,007 young children living in 20 large US cities found that 55 percent had experienced at least one serious adversity by age 5 (Jiminez et al. 2016).

While many young children who experience a traumatic event recover well with the support of caring adults, others may experience more serious consequences in key developmental domains, such as

› An increased likelihood of emotional and behavioral challenges (aggression, withdrawal, increased fussiness, difficulty soothing, anxiety)

› Developmental issues (language delays, learning difficulties)

› Social and relationship difficulties (withdrawal, difficulty forming secure attachments, difficulty developing friendships)

› Physical health concerns (poor sleep, feeding problems, increased illness) (Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010; Bartlett et al. 2017; Dye 2018)

Some children will require different levels of individualized support and may benefit from multitiered approaches, including interventions that exist outside of a classroom or program (Hemmeter et al. 2016; NCTSN 2017). This aligns with developmentally appropriate practice, which advises that "educators implement systems of support that help children practice self-regulation and provide

additional supports where needed" (NAEYC 2020, 16). Educators may need to suggest referrals for assessment or additional services, such as to mental health professionals, pediatricians, and/or community organizations offering specialized services (Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010; NCTSN 2017).

Collaborating with families is essential throughout this process, as is learning about families' contexts and preferences, involving them in decision making, and providing responsive supports (Foreman et al. 2021). While trauma may affect children in many ways, teachers can foster resilience by intentionally noticing and building upon children's and their families' strengths and capabilities.

Resilience and Trauma-Informed Approaches

While including an overarching strengths-based approach, we also focus on promoting young children's social skills to foster their internal strength and resilience. Research emphasizes that many children will recover from traumatic experiences, particularly when provided with support from caring adults who are actively involved in their daily lives (Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010). Supportive relationships—combined with resources for developing the skills needed for coping, self-regulation, and good decision making—can strengthen the capabilities that underlie resilience in children and reduce the potential for negative long-term outcomes (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2015). This is consistent with NAEYC's guidance on advancing equity, which states that "trauma-informed care and healing-centered approaches can support resilience and help mitigate the effects of toxic stress and ACEs [adverse childhood experiences]" (2019, 11).

The trauma-informed practices we present in the next section will be familiar to many early childhood educators, especially those trained to support children's social and emotional development. They are consistent with literature and research that addresses the strengths and needs of young children who have experienced early childhood trauma (e.g., Harvard Center on the Developing Child, n.d.; Hohmann et

al. 2008; Wright 2014; Bailey 2015; Hemmeter et al. 2016; Bartlett et al. 2017; Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020).

5 Ss for Creating Trauma-Informed Early Learning Settings

FIRST:ECE's trauma-informed strategies are based on principles that emphasize safety and structure, support, self-regulation, and building upon strengths (Griffin et al. 2012). We adapted and expanded these concepts for application in early childhood settings. Through daily interactions, educators can learn from and about children and their families and are well-positioned to play a key role in applying trauma-informed practices. In this section, we offer an extended example of educators in a pre-K classroom who responded to the strengths, needs, and interests of Kaden, a 4-year-old boy impacted by trauma. In addition, we explain each of the 5 Ss and include considerations for early childhood educators as they work with young children in their own settings.

Observing and Learning About Kaden's Behaviors

It's November, and Kaden's teachers, Sarah and Rosie, have observed that he often cries during the transition from home to school and has a hard time separating from his mom. They see that he has difficulty initiating an activity during center time and often wanders around the room. In addition, he frequently behaves in ways that do not seem to them to have a clear cause, such as damaging materials, hitting other children who may be playing near him, and running and hiding from them.

To better understand the meaning behind Kaden's behaviors, they consider what they know about him and his family. Kaden and his mother, Summer, live with his grandmother, Ms. Barbara, and his mother works at night. In addition, Summer has shared with them that Kaden's father no longer lives at home, and because of safety concerns, Kaden no longer has contact with him. While Sarah and Rosie

are unsure why that is the case, they recognize that they will need to do more to understand and respond to Kaden's behaviors.

It is common for educators to have incomplete information about children's circumstances outside of their learning environments. Sarah and Rosie learned about Kaden and his context but still had questions. Despite the missing information, they considered how his experiences of trauma might have been related to the behaviors he displayed, and they recognized the need to implement trauma-informed strategies into their teaching. Following, we share how they worked over the course of the fall and winter months to provide Kaden with supportive relationships, safety, self-regulation skills building, and social skills building to intentionally nurture his resilience and how they attended to their own well-being through self-care.

Supportive Relationships

Sarah and Rosie start to examine the relationships Kaden has with them and others. They observe that Kaden struggles to separate from his mother each morning, even as Sarah tries to help him transition into the classroom. He often cries, holds Summer's hand tightly, and hides behind her. Based on what they've learned about trauma-informed practices, Sarah and Rosie focus on building upon Kaden's positive relationships, including his strong connection to his mother. They consider how important Kaden's time is with his mother, especially since her work schedule means that she and Kaden often have different wake/sleep schedules. With this in mind, Sarah and Rosie extend the amount of time they allot for one of their daily routines with the children—expressing positive words of warmth and care about those who are absent for the day as well as others they want to acknowledge.

When Kaden shares who he'd like to send caring thoughts to, he often says, "My mama!" As time goes on, Kaden begins to use this activity as an opportunity to share about other significant people in his life. One day, he mentions his neighbor, Mr. Bob, who established their community garden and is currently hospitalized with an illness. He even

makes a card for him. In a later interaction, Summer proudly tells Rosie how meaningful Kaden's card was to Mr. Bob.

The most reliable predictor of resilience for children who have experienced trauma is the presence of caring, stable, and supportive adults, so it is essential that educators foster strong relationships with children and build upon their existing relationships (Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010). Sarah and Rosie leveraged one of their daily routines to build upon Kaden's positive associations with his loved ones. This helped them learn more about Kaden, his family, and their support system. Over time, Kaden exhibited more prosocial behaviors, such as sharing kind words about and to others, and he began to more readily engage with his teachers.

Many children affected by trauma can experience disrupted relationships that fail to fulfill their needs. This can result in difficulty establishing trusting connections with others, such as a new educator (Statman-Weil 2015). They can find the presence of new adults challenging or overwhelming and may exhibit limited verbal communication, avoid asking for help, and resist comfort or appropriate touch when offered. They may have similar challenges connecting with peers. For example, they may prefer solitary play, be unaware or unsure about how to engage with their peers in play, and show aggression when navigating conflict (Wright 2014).

When educators intentionally foster supportive environments and plan for interactions, they help children feel secure, valued, and connected (Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020). A learning setting's routines provide opportunities for educators to nurture their connections with children and provide the kinds of serve-and-return interactions that develop the building blocks of resilience (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2015; Bartlett et al. 2017). This can result in behaviors such as greater engagement with educators and caregivers, cooperative play with their peers, and smoother transitions to and from school (see "Strategies for Supportive Relationships" below).

Strategies for Supportive Relationships

Educators can consider the following intentions and strategies to develop positive and affirming interactions that help foster supportive relationships with young children.

Intention	Strategy
Cultivate supportive settings by establishing routines that foster connections within a playful, joyful, and inclusive learning community.	**Use greetings.** Provide children with visual choices for sharing greetings and goodbyes with teachers each day that include pictures of touch and no-touch options (a high-five, a hug, or a cheerful wave). **Send care.** Send loving thoughts and/or words to those who are absent, and give them a warm welcome with a card or a group chant when they return.
Create intentional, positive, and repeated interactions with children to foster relational consistency.	**Provide one-on-one engagement.** Be fully present with children by responding to their cues, actions, or expressions through serve-and-return interactions and joining the child's focus (pointing to a butterfly a child is looking at and saying, "You see the butterfly on the window"). **Connect through games.** Create enjoyable learning experiences with individual children through personal connection games, such as Peekaboo, Pat-A-Cake, or a fun hand jive. **Connect using language and tone.** Consistently express warmth and care through tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language to each child regardless of whether they are exhibiting behaviors perceived as positive or challenging.

Safety

Sarah and Rosie have noticed that Kaden runs and hides from them during unstructured periods, such as the transition from home to school and from outside time to lunch. They consider how the consistent use of visuals that communicate the sequence of class routines could help him and the other children anticipate what comes next throughout the day. In addition to the visual aids they already provide, they create one with images that depict the steps for coming inside and starting lunch. They give an individual version to Kaden to reference as he completes each step. Over the course of a month, Kaden's use of these aids begins to make a difference: He greets others when he enters class in the morning and exhibits a smoother transition from outdoor play to lunch.

The effects of trauma can influence a child's sense of safety: A child may remain on high alert because of unpredictable and/or unsafe past and present experiences (Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010). *Trauma triggers* are powerful reminders of traumatic experiences that can activate a child's stress response (NCTSN 2008). Children may perceive danger when there is none, which can cause them to exhibit fight, flight, or freeze behaviors (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2014). For example, a fight response might look like a child exhibiting verbal or physical aggression with teachers or peers; a flight response may result in a child running away, hiding, or avoiding eye contact; a freeze response might include a child withdrawing, being silent, seeming unfocused, wandering around, or daydreaming (Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020).

When there is a lack of consistency and clarity, children can be left wondering what is coming next, which can feel scary. This is especially the case for children with a history of trauma. Strategies that increase structure and clarify routines can help children feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically secure (Statman-Weil 2015; Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020). For example, Kaden had his own visual resource for the outside-to-lunch routine, which allowed him to see what was coming up next. His ability to anticipate what actions to take and in which order helped with

his regulation as he demonstrated fewer behaviors connected to internal fight, flight, and freeze responses. Sarah and Rosie also provided visual aids to the children that showed the routine for handwashing. In addition, they began including a five-minute warning before each transition and developed a sign that told the children when it was time to come inside.

> Educators can enhance a sense of safety by building structure, reinforcing predictability, helping children mentally prepare for changes or transitions, and modeling safe behavior.

Educators can enhance a sense of safety by building structure, reinforcing predictability, helping children mentally prepare for changes or transitions, and modeling safe behavior (Bartlett et al. 2017). Children who feel safe are more likely to exhibit cooperative behaviors with peers and adults, such as a willingness to transition from one part of the day to the next calmly (see "Strategies for Safety" on page 19).

Strategies for Safety

Educators can consider the following intentions and strategies to create an environment where young children can feel safe.

Intention	Strategy
Create structure and predictability through daily schedules and routines.	**Offer a visual for routines.** Refer children to visuals of schedules and daily routines that are posted at their eye level; create books with individual routines for children who find transitions to be challenging. **Implement rituals for transitions.** Plan and consistently implement rituals to support children through transitions (ringing a chime and saying, "Five more minutes until clean up time" and singing a clean-up song with children while putting items away). **Communicate changes.** Tell children about expected changes to their routines when possible. (Share a picture of a substitute teacher and explain how long they will be with the children.)
Teach what safe behavior feels, sounds, and looks like by consistently demonstrating that you are safe.	**Maintain composure.** Strive to remain composed and to be predictable in your interactions with children. Take a deep breath, soften your face and eyes, speak calmly, and offer help when a child feels frustrated. **Provide calm guidance.** When offering guidance, use encouraging, clear, and assertive communication focused on safe behavior. ("Walk safely with both feet on the path, like this. There you go; you are doing it.") **Increase safety.** De-escalate situations when a child is upset and exhibiting unsafe behaviors, such as aggression. Create a calming environment by taking a deep breath, using slow movements, and keeping your hands open, palms up, and visible at all times.

Self-Regulation Skills Building

Sarah and Rosie introduce different breathing techniques to children during a whole-group gathering. Then, they display visuals at the children's eye level around the room. They model how to use the visuals by referring to them at moments when they need to support their own regulation. They also individualize strategies for the children. For example, they post a flower-breathing visual aid near the playground door for Kaden and any other child who needs it. When Kaden finds one of the steps on his outside-to-lunch routine card momentarily challenging, he has learned to pick up an artificial flower next to the flower-breathing visual and inhale deeply while imagining the smell of a real flower. As he exhales, he visualizes himself blowing petals away. Once calm, he can engage in the steps required to go inside.

Childhood adversity can impact the brain and disrupt the development of executive function and self-regulation skills (Center on the Developing Child

2011). Controlling impulses and managing emotions and behaviors can be challenging for young children who live with chronic fear and anxiety. Children learn when and how to apply self-regulation skills through their social interactions, by observing others, and with practice. Young learners benefit when educators proactively teach specific strategies that build upon their emotional awareness and self-regulation skills (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2015; Statman-Weil 2015; Bartlett et al. 2017; Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020). Sarah and Rosie recognized that the breathing strategies they provided the children needed to be individualized to assist them during specific contexts and for specific purposes. Early childhood educators can teach about feelings through games and books and by introducing and practicing breathing and mindfulness strategies in whole groups, small groups, and during one-on-one interactions.

In addition, educators can help a child who seems to be experiencing heightened emotions by offering a safe and composed presence as they support the child in gaining more awareness of their feelings and about what is happening in their bodies. For example, they can calmly engage the child at eye level, saying, "Your arms are crossed like this, and your eyebrows just

went like this," while crossing their arms and knitting their eyebrows together to show the child what they are seeing. Next, they can name the emotion they are observing: "You seem frustrated." Then they can acknowledge the cause of the child's frustration and empathize with the child: "You wanted a turn. It's hard to wait." When children indicate signs of fight, flight, or freeze responses, a composed adult can help them identify what they are feeling without judgment. Once the child is in a more regulated state, they are better able to engage in problem solving and can answer questions, such as "What could you do instead?" or "How could you solve this problem?" Taking time to acknowledge a child's emotional experiences in the moment can help them feel seen, heard, and understood (see "Strategies for Self-Regulation Skills Building" below).

Strategies for Self-Regulation Skills Building

Educators can consider the following intentions and strategies to support children's development of self-regulation skills.

Intention	Strategy
Serve as models of self-regulatory practices to children throughout the day.	**Encourage purposeful breathing.** Teach breathing strategies, and model them at different times and in different situations. Model diaphragmatic breathing, also known as belly breathing. **Link words with body language.** Name and describe the changes you observe in yourself and in children related to facial expressions and body language. **Model emotional awareness.** Identify your feelings, and narrate your composure strategies. (Take a deep breath, and say, "I am feeling frustrated. I am going to take a few deep breaths and calm myself.")
Scaffold children's development of self-regulation skills.	**Provide space and resources.** Create a welcoming space where composure strategies are accessible and used throughout the day with adult support; provide children with resources such as a feelings faces chart, books, photos, and games about feelings. **Integrate physical movement.** Plan activities that include physical movement and rhythm for all children multiple times a day, and incorporate these activities when challenging behaviors arise. (Create a sensory path that involves large motor skills, such as bunny hopping, crab walking, wall pushes, and so on.) **Observe and describe expressive changes.** Calmly and objectively describe observed changes in a child's face, body, and tone of voice. Show and describe your understanding of their internal experiences through your words, tone, and facial expressions. (Mirror the child's expression, and say, "Your mouth went down like this. You seem disappointed. You wanted to play outside, and it's raining.")

Social Skills Building

Sarah and Rosie have observed that Kaden needs support when interacting with his peers. Because of their growing connection with Kaden, he is more willing to spend time with them one-on-one. Through intentionally designed, playful experiences, Kaden practices how to ask for a turn and borrow a toy, request help when he needs it, and join in with other children who are playing. His expressive language is still emerging, so Sarah and Rosie teach him hand signals (extending his palm upward) and offer him language to construct shorter sentences ("Turn, please" and "Help, please").

One day, Sarah notices Kaden addressing another child by name. "Joey," he says holding his hand out, palm up, "turn, please."

"You did it!" Sarah tells Kaden. "You said 'Joey,' held your hand out like this (*models the gesture*), and said, 'Turn please.' "

Children impacted by trauma may witness and experience hurtful interactions in relationships that include abuse, neglect, or domestic violence (Fantuzzo & Fusco 2007; HHS et al. 2024). Such experiences can affect how they engage in social interactions and impact their ability to cultivate relationships with others (Zero to Six Collaborative Group & NCTSN 2010; Jiminez et al. 2016). Safely resolving difficult or complicated social situations requires skills related to executive function, including working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Wiltshire & Scott 2024). Individualized teaching and supports that provide opportunities for children to make choices and engage in give-and-take interactions can help them build executive function skills and manage their emotions and behaviors toward others (Center on the Developing Child 2011).

Safe and supportive educators who intentionally model and teach social skills through planned experiences and in-the-moment strategies can help young children establish positive relationships (Wright 2014). A planned experience might look like an educator arranging an interaction between two children so they can practice collaborating during a play or work task. The educator could support the children by staying nearby to offer help if needed. An in-the-moment strategy could involve an educator observing that a child is having difficulty engaging with other children who are playing with one another. They might help by approaching the group with the child and modeling how to join in (Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020). By providing children with frequent scaffolded experiences and opportunities for practice, educators can cultivate their understanding of what social skills sound like, look like, and feel like (see "Strategies for Social Skills Building" below).

Strategies for Social Skills Building

Educators can consider the following intentions and strategies to support children in their development of social skills.

Intention	Strategy
Through intentional teaching and modeling, support the development of social skills during naturally arising situations and conflicts.	**Model and encourage social skills.** Guide children's use of respectful language by encouraging them to practice using phrases such as "excuse me," "thank you," and "please." Encourage turn-taking skills, such as asking for, waiting for, and offering a turn. Share how to ask for help from others and how to communicate a desire to join others in play.
Support children to engage in problem solving and to make safe choices.	**Offer safe choices.** Help children identify and practice behaviors and words that are safe by offering choices. (If a child was throwing sand, say, "Throwing sand is not safe. To keep you and others safe, do you want to scoop the sand with the shovel or with the cup?")
	Model setting limits. Demonstrate and encourage peer-to-peer limit setting. Show children how to communicate requests respectfully and to listen attentively with a focus on finding solutions and solving problems. ("Would you like Jordan to color on his own paper? Tell him, 'Please color on your own paper.' Jordan, if you want to color with Matt, what could you ask him?")

Self-Care for Educators

While learning about trauma-informed strategies, Sarah and Rosie also learn about burnout and secondary trauma. They realize that they have been experiencing some of the signs of emotional and physical fatigue, such as irritability, trouble focusing, more frequent headaches, and sleeping difficulties. To address this, they create a supportive group of teachers who engage in problem solving and reflection. Once formed, the group helps to foster relationships. For example, some of the teachers choose to meet at the school track for a walk 30 minutes before class. Afterward, they feel energetic, mindful, and ready to greet the day. Strategies like these make a difference in Sarah's and Rosie's mindsets and their work satisfaction.

Early childhood educators who teach and care for children impacted by trauma may learn about difficult histories. They may also face stress and challenging behaviors daily. Over time, exposure to the trauma of others can take an emotional toll (NCTSN 2008; Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020). It is important for educators to be aware of stress indicators, which can include

› Physical symptoms (headaches, lethargy, weight changes)

› Mental and emotional symptoms (sadness, irritability, hopelessness, guilt, memory problems, feeling overwhelmed)

› Relational symptoms (self-isolation, relationship conflicts)

To help alleviate and address burnout, educators can monitor these signs by routinely checking in with themselves and their colleagues (NCTSN 2017).

Self-care is an important part of an educator's ability to implement trauma-informed approaches (Erdman & Colker, with Winter 2020). Self-care strategies can increase educators' self-awareness and help them to intentionally balance their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. As a result, they are better able to implement trauma-informed practices such as modeling composure and providing structure and predictability. They may also have an enhanced capacity for empathy in the face of challenging behaviors (see "Strategies for Educator Self-Care" below).

Strategies for Educator Self-Care

Educators can consider the following intentions and strategies to support their existing self-care practices.

Intention	Strategy
Establish a regular practice of slowing down and cultivating awareness.	**Practice awareness.** Take time to notice your feelings, limits, needs, and resources. Allow time for slowing down. Engage in quiet reflection, asking yourself what you are thinking about, how you feel, and what you need. ("Do I need rest, a discussion with a friend, or exercise?")
Develop a healthier balance that allows for a focus on self.	**Establish more balance.** Reflect on the areas of your life that could benefit from more balance (physical, spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual, and overall health). Consider how to create a greater balance between your focus on others and self, activity and rest, home and work.
Cultivate connection to self, others, and outside interests.	**Develop connections.** Find ways to fuel your own passions and core beliefs. Connect with others who share similar interests, and invite them to join you in an enjoyable activity and conversation. Seek connection, purpose, and meaning with others, such as through a faith community or volunteer organization.

> When trauma-informed approaches are implemented collaboratively and program-wide, educators can create educational environments where children feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.

Conclusion

One Friday afternoon in April, Ms. Barbara, Kaden's grandmother, arrives to pick him up. "How did the week go?" she asks Sarah. Sarah tells her, "Kaden enjoyed playing with new materials in our sensory table." Before Kaden and his grandmother leave, Sarah kneels so she is at eye level with Kaden. She warmly tells him, "Kaden, you asked for a turn with the new materials in the sensory table, and you waited for a turn. Then you gave others a turn when you were finished. You seemed to have a lot of fun, and you were very helpful." Kaden's face lights up, and he offers a big smile.

Sarah and Rosie see how far Kaden has come over the course of six months. At first, it was difficult to see progress, but over time, the daily implementation of the five strategies added up to big changes! Kaden's story is not unusual. We hope that by sharing it and these trauma-informed strategies, educators will feel empowered to practice the 5 Ss in their own settings.

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Behavior Guidance with Infants and Toddlers

Strengthening Each Child's Sense of Belonging

Marie L. Masterson

During morning arrival time, 10-month-old Kyara's mother transfers her to Ms. Chloe's arms and says, "I'm sorry to leave Kyara while she's crying, but I'm running late." Ms. Chloe assures her, "I have a book and activity waiting for Kyara. I'll touch base with you later."

Ms. Chloe picks up the book *Bunnies,* by Richard Scarry, and a plush bunny displayed on the shelf. She settles with Kyara into the rocking chair. "I'm sorry you are sad. Let's snuggle and read." She opens the book and begins, "Little bunny, baby bunny, sweet baby bunny. Do you see the bunny?"

Ms. Chloe offers the plush bunny to Kyara. "Bunny has floppy ears. Can you pet the bunny?" Kyara looks for a long time at Ms. Chloe's face without moving. Ms. Chloe rocks her quietly. Finally, Kyara inhales and lets out a long, shaky sigh and reaches for the bunny.

* * *

After lunch in the toddler room, Ms. Talia drops a wooden peg into a hole in the cap of a large cup. The peg plunks to the bottom. She hands a peg to 18-month-old Joachim. He drops it into the cup. Ms. Talia hands him another peg. He drops it in and reaches for another. This quiet partnership looks like play, but it is a calming transition time for Joachim.

When all the pegs are in the cup, Ms. Talia offers Joachim a pacifier and small blanket. Joachim takes the blanket, flicking the tag back and forth with his finger. Ms. Talia stays quietly next to him. After a few minutes, he crawls onto Ms. Talia's lap. She hums and then sings, "A dormir, mi bebito (Go to sleep, my baby)." When Joachim lays his head on her arm, Ms. Talia lifts Joachim into the crib and stands for a minute with her hand resting on his back.

During these moments of comforting, both teachers are engaging in *behavior guidance*, or nurturing and supporting young children's emerging skills across all domains of development through coregulation, strengths-based encouragement, and consistency over time (Masterson, forthcoming). With Kyara and Joachim, the teachers are partners, assisting the children in rebounding from upset feelings by seeking comfort and connection with others. They also understand and incorporate the ways families offer comfort and assistance so that children feel a sense of familiarity in the routines.

Many conversations about behavior guidance have focused on challenging behaviors, particularly related to energetic toddlers, where adults may hold unrealistic expectations about children's capabilities without meeting their needs for active play, rest, appropriately challenging experiences, and supportive supervision. Too often, this important dialogue has neglected to address the unique role of behavior guidance in fostering infant and toddler development.

Behavior guidance is deeply connected to each child's sense of belonging. Infants and toddlers demonstrate a sense of belonging when they feel accepted and develop close relationships of trust with those who care for them (Selby et al. 2018; Johnson & Peterson 2019). But belonging also relates to infants' and toddlers' sense of self, including their physical sensations and body awareness. Behavior guidance impacts children's ideas about who they are and what they can do, which is part of *self-agency*—the belief that they can develop control over their choices and decisions (Reschke 2019). They express comfort and confidence during daily routines and play and develop close relationships with adults and peers—patterns that strengthen resilience over their lifetimes.

When early childhood educators understand what helps each child feel reassured and safe, they can provide behavior guidance as part of daily learning experiences that support each child's development. They recognize that children internalize a picture of who they are based on the way others respond to them—learning that they are worthy of gentle care, personal attention, support, and kindness when they have needs or feel frustrated. Educators respond in ways that protect each child's sense of self and by modeling gentleness, respect, consistency, and caring.

Behavior guidance with infants and toddlers is fundamentally preventative. It is effective when early childhood educators are proactive and intentional in ensuring that infants and toddlers experience a sense of belonging. Behavior guidance with infants and toddlers is linked to developmentally appropriate practice and advancing equity. Developmentally appropriate practice includes "methods that promote each child's optimal development and learning through

a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning" (NAEYC 2020, 5). Recognizing and being responsive to each child's and family's context provides a foundation for equitable behavior guidance practices (NAEYC 2019).

For the past 20 years as an early childhood teacher, teacher trainer, and program observer, I have promoted approaches to behavior guidance that are anchored in understanding children's points of view and considering how experiences and interactions greatly impact their perceptions about their worth, identity, and sense of connection and belonging. This lens can help educators evaluate and nurture children's emerging skills while ensuring sensitivity to their developing sense of self. In this article, I describe strategies that educators in different types of settings can use—in partnership with families—to foster infants' and toddlers' sense of belonging through behavior guidance. These include practicing coregulation techniques, building on families' strengths and contexts, individualizing approaches, and providing consistent routines and expectations.

Practicing Coregulation Techniques

In the opening vignette, Kyara was comforted by the quiet morning routine. She was calmed by the rhythmic patterns of the words and drawn into the comfortable and intimate focus of Ms. Chloe's soft voice, funny faces, and inviting actions. Ms. Chloe did not hurry Kyara but gave her time to respond. In this scenario, Ms. Chole was engaging in *coregulation*, an important aspect of behavior guidance with infants and toddlers.

Coregulation means that teachers interact with children to scaffold or assist with children's regulation (Paley & Hajal 2022). Children are active agents—participating with the adult in creating an understanding of the shared process. Coregulation is one of an "extensive repertoire of skills and teaching strategies" that are part of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2020, 21). When a teacher helps a child take deep breaths, talks about solutions to a problem, and assists the child in reengaging in a new activity, these are examples of coregulation, which is essential for the development of self-soothing (NICHQ 2024).

Infants and toddlers do not yet have the physical, emotional, and language skills to support self-regulation. These develop over time as sensitive adults provide coregulation and scaffolding (Paley & Hajal 2022). Families and educators actively encourage children's awareness, understanding, and management of emotions. They model skills like expressing feelings, asking for help, showing kindness, problem solving, and persistence that provide a foundation for self-regulation. During playful games and soothing routines, adults are aware of children's feelings, focus, and thinking, which results in a protected space for sharing who they are and feeling valued (Gitz-Johansen 2022). To be able to provide this support, educators must also attend to their own well-being (see "The Importance of Educator Well-Being in Behavior Guidance" on page 30).

To practice coregulation, teachers talk with children throughout the day. They connect through personal conversations during caring routines and meals as well as during play. They notice and respond to infants' and toddlers' vocalizations and movements and give children time to show what they need. When educators initiate interactions, they describe what they are doing, what the child is doing, or what other children are doing: "Noreen is sad because it's raining, and we can't go outside. Let's get a book and read with her." (See "Coregulation Strategies for Infants and Toddlers" on page 28 for additional examples of coregulation techniques.)

As educators practice coregulation to help infants and toddlers regulate their emotions and express feelings, they can engage in trauma-informed practices, which are designed to address children's stressful or traumatic experiences both in and outside of an early learning program (Morris et al. 2021). Trauma-informed teaching is an essential foundation for behavior guidance and is "a profound paradigm shift in knowledge, perspective, attitudes, and skills that continues to deepen and unfold over time" (PMC 2021, 1). It introduces practices that are healing, safe, warm, and welcoming and that offer experiences where children feel secure and families feel connected (HHS 2022).

Just as the families of Kyara and Joachim in the opening vignettes benefitted from trauma-informed teaching, all educators, families, and children benefit when they participate in a caring community that offers

Coregulation Strategies for Infants and Toddlers

Because infants and toddlers are beginning to acquire language skills, coregulation often takes the form of modeling, physical reassurance, and individualized coaching that matches each child's understanding. Adults recognize and assist with stressful situations. They model effective ways to identify, express, and manage emotions while refocusing children on meaningful activities. Teachers can use the following strategies to promote calm and scaffold infants' and toddlers' regulation.

Strategy	Actions	Individualization
Comforting	Remain in close proximity. Offer calming touch and gentle physical support. Use repetitive patterns like rocking, patting, and deep breathing. Provide comfort items like a blanket, lovey, or pacifier when these are part of a family's plan.	Be sensitive to children's nonverbal and verbal communication. Monitor to ensure children are comfortable with physical touch.
Containing	Confine rather than escalate an event to de-escalate fear, anxiety, sadness, or frustration. Use simple verbal reassurance: "Momma will be back after naptime"; "The rain will be gone soon. We are inside where we are safe and dry."	Help children manage the intensity of their feelings. Listen and affirm as well as reassure. Model words without expecting toddlers to "use their words" when they are upset.
Calming	Model calming techniques like deep breathing, snuggling with a blanket, or rocking. Take time to connect one-on-one and give individual focus.	Reassure children they have a safe space for managing their emotions. Provide time, protected spaces, and responsive listening. With infants, assist in soothing.
Coaching	Model positive solutions: "When we are sad, we can talk with a teacher or friend"; "When the tower falls over, we feel mad. A teacher can help." Notice the needs of others: "Josiah needs a stuffed animal too. Let's bring the basket to him." Use creativity to engage learning through puppets and stories: "What can the puppet do to solve the problem?"	Help children to express how they feel and to get their needs met. Support problem solving, so children develop effective strategies over time. Promote empathy for self and others through narration. Engage children as partners in learning and contributing to solutions.

nurturing practices, including sensitive communication with families. Teachers recognize the impact of trauma and are able to identify stress-reactive behaviors like prolonged crying, difficulty managing transitions, separation anxiety, or tantrums. They respond with comfort, safety, and strategies for coping. They provide appropriate structure to minimize triggers and ensure consistency and support (Osofsky 2024). In addition to practices within the early learning setting, educators and support professionals connect families with early intervention services and a network of resources in their communities. Caring and trusting relationships with families matter, as stronger relationships lead to more positive outcomes for children's development (Cook et al. 2024). During times of stress or trauma, these relationships and practices are perhaps even more important (for more on trauma-informed teaching, see "Trauma-Informed Early Learning Settings: Approaches to Building Resilience in Young Children" in this issue).

Foregrounding Families' Strengths and Contexts

Both opening vignettes reflect teachers' knowledge of the families in their settings and their strengths and contexts. In both cases, the teachers learned about children and their families through frequent meetings. Families demonstrated how their children were held, rocked, fed, and put down for a nap. The teachers asked questions to ensure that their ways of initiating interactions and responding to the children were congruent with what the families did.

For example, Ms. Chloe knew that Kyara and her mother were living with friends as they regrouped after being unhoused. Ms. Chloe understood their unique strengths and helped both Kyara and her mother experience connection and belonging as part of the program's caring community. From her conversations with Joachim's family, Ms. Talia knew they had moved to the city when Joachim's father was deployed in the military. Joachim's mother shared that he coslept with her at home. Because she had an understanding of his family's context, Ms. Talia understood that Joachim needed time to feel safe and adjust to sleeping in a crib. She let him initiate physical closeness, knowing that patience and consistency would lead to him feeling secure and trusting. Joachim's mother shared the strategies she used to care for and comfort Joachim at home, and Ms. Talia used the same strategies in her interactions with Joachim.

As illustrated by Ms. Chloe and Ms. Talia, behavior guidance with infants and toddlers is embedded within the cultural frameworks of families, which include their values, priorities, and beliefs about child rearing and goals for socialization (Masterson, forthcoming). This is also part of developmentally appropriate practice—teachers must understand the multiple cultural heritages, identities, values, and practices that make up their programs and communities (NAEYC 2020). A single family does not represent just one culture. Characteristics within cultures also vary, and practices may change over time. However, infant and toddler educators may introduce subtle and complex differences compared to a family's values or practices (such as feeding, toilet training, responding to, or caring for children). Because of this, it is important that they engage with families so these differences are not left unexamined. Educators can engage through family surveys and family conversations to ask questions about each aspect of caring routines at home, such as "What happens before and after napping?"; "How is the child diapered?"; "How does the child like to be comforted?"; and "What values and goals are important to the family?"

Dismantling Biases

Effective behavior guidance depends on a deep understanding of families' values and priorities and embracing differences as assets and strengths. However, studies have found that early childhood educators are less likely than other educators to expect bias to be present in their programs. This mindset is known as the *bias blind spot*, in which people may recognize bias in others but not in themselves (Ehrlinger et al. 2005; Blackson et al. 2022). For this reason, all forms of deficit thinking and deficit-oriented language should be evaluated to address implicit bias and ensure the highest expectations for all children (Kranski & Steed 2022). Additionally, racial bias has been prevalent in behavior guidance practices over time, with critical and detrimental impacts for young children (Meltzoff & Gilliam 2024). Therefore, honoring the unique developmental, linguistic, and cultural patterns of each child and family is essential.

Implicit biases can be seen through deficit-oriented language that conveys beliefs about what is normal, who is capable, and attitudes about families' economic status, mental health, and other lifestyle choices (Spence et al. 2022). Teachers may also hold unrealistic expectations about children's abilities to manage emotions and behaviors (ZTT 2016). This lack of understanding can lead to teachers' judgments and misperceptions about families' ways of caring for and responding to their children.

Learning about and honoring cultural differences can help teachers evaluate children's behaviors without value judgments, recognizing differences as appropriate and responding with gentle, positive affirmation. Developmentally appropriate practice requires teachers to recognize and build on each child's strengths, "taking care not to harm any aspect of each child's physical, cognitive, social, or emotional well-being" (NAEYC 2020, 5). Learning about and honoring cultural values protect and affirm children's developing sense of self and allow teachers to cultivate

deeper partnerships with families as collaborators in goal setting and decision making. Infants and toddlers are developing a sense of themselves as capable and valuable and are influenced by the messages they hear and the ways they are treated.

Reflecting Families' Contexts

To create continuity between children's homes and the program, effective educators ensure that children see their lives reflected in the setting, materials, activities, songs, stories, images, and positive messages of the program. Beyond the materials, teachers can lead conversations that communicate pride in diversity and are inclusive of different races, ethnicities, cultures, languages, family structures, ages, abilities, and genders.

Educators ask families to demonstrate and explain the ways children are dressed to go outdoors, prepared for naps, comforted, and fed. Educators learn by observing how families hold children, the kind of support they give during diapering or toileting, and the ways they engage children in new activities. They notice how families interact physically, verbally, and emotionally, and they adjust their practices to match what feels comfortable to each child. This level of continuity minimizes stress for each child and shows respect and honor for families' ways of being.

Approaches to caring for children are culturally determined, yet families' social and cultural contexts often guide behavior at an unconscious level so that ways of approaching caregiving and behavior happen without evaluation (De Gioia 2013). Learning from families makes the daily life of the program feel *familiar*—which has the same root word as *family*—establishing a sense of security, identity, and belonging.

Individualizing Approaches

One of the core considerations of developmentally appropriate practice is individuality. This is a critical aspect of interactions that guide behavior with infants and toddlers. While commonality includes honoring the social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts of families and children, individuality relates to "the characteristics and experiences unique to each child . . . that have implications for how best to support

their development and learning" (NAEYC 2020, 7). Appropriate, effective behavior guidance depends on educators' knowledge of each child's individuality, including their "social identities, interests, strengths, and preferences; their personalities, motivations, and approaches to learning; and their knowledge, skills, and abilities related to their cultural experiences" (NAEYC 2020, 7). Understanding each child's perspective and contexts allows educators to adapt the setting and ways they nurture each child's developing skills. They foster belonging and safety so children can make mistakes, learn by doing, and engage with people and experiences without fear of disapproval, anger, or shame. Providing psychological and physical safety is part of being responsive to individuality and lays the foundation for the development of trust, self-agency, and belonging.

To individualize their approaches to behavior guidance, educators must become keen observers of children, learning from them about their strengths and ways

The Importance of Educator Well-Being in Behavior Guidance

Behavior guidance with infants and toddlers is connected to the well-being and stability of the adults who educate and care for them. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators became increasingly burned out due to heightened safety and teaching requirements (Swindle 2023). Perceived levels of stress skyrocketed, along with workforce instability and job-related challenges (Quinn et al. 2022). Emotional exhaustion impacted educators' well-being and their abilities to respond warmly and positively during individualized care with infants and toddlers (Brophy-Herb et al. 2023). In response, some have paired with colleagues through professional growth groups called communities of practice to establish authentic relationships of support and to learn about and develop goals for trauma-responsive practices (CCR 2024). Such efforts have increased a sense of connection, reduced feelings of isolation, and helped educators recognize the signs of stress and better support children who have experienced trauma (Kokoros 2023; Resilient Futures 2024).

of being that are unique and special. By staying close to children, educators can notice changes in their development and play. This close proximity ensures safety and allows teachers to intervene before children become frustrated or fatigued.

An observation chart can be used to learn about each child in a systematic way. For example, a child may become frustrated when they are over- or understimulated, when they lack access to meaningful materials and interactions, or when they are uncomfortable. Once educators know the source of a child's frustration, they can work to validate that child's feelings. For example, during diapering, a child's bottom may be sore, which may cause them to resist going with the teacher to have a diaper changed, pull away while being diapered, or exhibit anxiety when using the toilet. Teachers can respond, "I know your bottom feels uncomfortable. I'll be gentle and help you."

As they observe and interact with the infants and toddlers in their settings, teachers can ask themselves the following questions:

> What behaviors indicate emerging skills?

> What verbal and nonverbal cues does the child use to indicate their interests and preferences?

> How does the child show they are delighted, lonely, stressed, or hungry?

> What signs indicate the child is tired, bored, or needs a change of pace?

> What support does the child need to engage with others?

> What are the child's unique traits that can be encouraged?

Questions like these foster a proactive mindset, encouraging intentional learning about each child, their behaviors, and the meaning behind those behaviors. This helps teachers individualize behavior guidance approaches and thereby support each child's sense of belonging.

Providing Consistent Routines and Expectations

Consistent people, places, and routines are essential for children's emotional development, mental health, and well-being (Gee & Cohodes 2023). Through repetition, children learn to trust what will happen in the moment and understand what will happen next. The following strategies show how the teachers in the opening vignettes used proactive support for children's developing skills. Ms. Chloe assisted Kyara's transition to the program by anticipating her need for coregulation and engaging her in meaningful activities. Ms. Talia offered Joachim quiet activity choices and provided comfort and connection. Both teachers took time to plan, ensuring that routines were stable and responsive to each child. The strategies below offer foundational anchors for behavior guidance with infants and toddlers.

> **Plan predictable routines and schedules.** Predictable routines establish expected patterns that minimize behavior challenges (Ren et al. 2022). Consistent cues and signals help children respond and participate with confidence. For example, diapering and napping are individualized for each child, reflect children's experiences with their families, and offer personal connection and support.

> **Be consistent with expectations and behavior redirection.** For example, if toddlers are to eat food only at a child-size table, gently assist them in keeping food at the table. Keep the focus on effective solutions: "This is Sofia's space. Here is your space." Follow through with support, encouragement, and positive conversation (Masterson, forthcoming).

> **Keep instructions simple.** Give brief, one-step instructions (Masterson 2018). For a child kneeling on a chair, say, "Sit to be safe." Gently assist the child in sitting. For an infant getting ready for sleep, say, "Nap time. Do you want your blanket or teddy bear?"

> **Coordinate daily tasks with coteachers.** Update a whiteboard or clipboard with the daily schedule and assignment of tasks to minimize transition times and ensure coordinated

supervision (Masterson, forthcoming). Connect daily to talk about what worked, what needs to be adjusted, and what can be added or changed to be more effective.

Conclusion

Behavior guidance is deeply connected to each child's sense of belonging. Infants' and toddlers' emerging sense of self is associated with the positive feelings of close proximity and their sense of belonging with others. Educators, families, and the program community can together instill an enduring sense of value and worth for each child through interactions that communicate caring and respect. Over time, as children internalize experiences of safety, comfort, and nurturing, they develop a lifelong blueprint for healthy practices of self-care, stress management, and the ability to turn to others for comfort and insight—hallmarks of resilience, well-being, and lifelong learning (NCTSN 2023). These approaches are highly effective in preventing behavior issues over time and ensuring positive learning experiences for every child.

Reflection Questions

1. What assumptions or biases may interfere with deep understanding of children's contexts, strengths, and behaviors?

2. How does defining behavior guidance as strengthening all domains of development through coregulation, strengths-based encouragement, and consistency over time benefit children, families, and educators?

3. How can you incorporate behavior guidance as an active and intentional part of planning, communication, and reflection so that stress mediation, support for emerging skills, and affirmation of identity are priorities?

4. What steps can you take to individualize interactions with children during transitions, caring routines, and play to effectively support their sense of comfort, security, and belonging?

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Challenging Behavior or Age-Appropriate Play?

Recognizing the Learning Significance of Toddlers' Schema Play

Sean Durham, Travis L. Morgan, and Ashton Bridges

The toddlers in Mr. Chavez's 2-year-old class are playing with various loose parts and tools at the water table. They begin splashing and scooping water onto the floor. When the children do not respond to Mr. Chavez's instructions to keep the water in the table, he ends the activity. The water table ends up being a place to store toys for the rest of the year.

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Ms. Montgomery's group of toddlers has been asked to contribute to a hallway display. After she shows them how to color paper with markers, many of the children begin using large circular motions to color beyond the paper and onto the table. When this continues—even after further instruction and demonstration on how to use the markers properly—Ms. Montgomery tells the children to "take a break" and "calm down." She removes the markers, and the children's art is not displayed.

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During center time, Ms. Weber and Ms. Wong observe some children lying on the floor underneath the snack table. Deciding these children are "not participating," the teachers move them from under the table and place them in a learning center. The children never appear to engage with the materials in the center and instead begin to climb on the shelves and roll on the floor.

Many early childhood educators have found themselves confused and even frustrated when they prepare environments and plan activities that do not seem to capture children's interests. This is especially true when working with toddlers, whose expressive and receptive language skills are still emerging and who are learning to regulate their impulses and emotions (Masterson & Grady 2024). Toddlers' assertions of independence, their increasing levels of mobility, and what adults may view as repetitive or challenging behaviors can often prompt teachers to "discipline" children by imposing consequences, issuing reprimands, or employing power-oriented strategies, such as physically moving them from one space to another (Gartrell 2020).

It is true that children may exhibit behaviors that limit their progress and potentially jeopardize the experiences of others. It is always important to maintain consistent boundaries for behavior to ensure that children's safety is paramount. Responding to authentic behavior challenges requires thoughtfulness, expertise, and intentional approaches administered over time and in partnership with families (Vallotton et al. 2021).

However, in our work as university faculty and toddler program directors, we (the authors) have witnessed dozens of examples of myths and misunderstandings about toddler behavior, where educators miss opportunities to support age-appropriate behaviors that facilitate children's explorations and emerging understandings of the world (Thomas 2020). What is often described as "challenging behavior" is instead a manifestation of unrealistic expectations, disconnected relationships, and environments that fail to meet the cognitive and physical demands of a group of wonderfully maturing children.

Rather than trying to control behaviors that educators view as incorrect or unproductive, we suggest that they intentionally observe, reflect, and respond to toddlers' *schemas*, or the repeated patterns of actions and/or behaviors often found in children's play that help them construct meaning (Meade & Cubey 2008; Louis et al. 2018). Lack of knowledge about the role of schemas in children's development can lead to missed opportunities to support children and how they acquire new information (Thomas 2020). In this article, we examine schemas and schema play, what they look like in the toddler setting, and how educators can respond to both in ways that nurture and honor children's growth and learning.

What Are Schemas and Schema Play?

Schemas help form connections in the brain, build new ideas and understandings, and develop useful skills (McDermott 2020). The concept of a schema is rooted in theory and practice stemming back decades. This includes the work of Jean Piaget, Chris Athey, and Frances Atherton. Piaget established that children's mental activities and resulting knowledge and skills occur through their repeated explorations and actions

on both their immediate environments and ordinary activities (Piaget 1953; Piaget 1959; Piaget 1970). More recent work by Deb Curtis, Nadia Jaboneta, and John Siraj-Blatchford strengthens the advantages of offering children opportunities to engage with carefully curated environments.

Schemas are discovery processes that help children develop key concepts about the world and that also serve as essential foundations to advance children's thinking: As children actively and repeatedly explore and engage with their surroundings, they form, refine, and expand what they know about them (Atherton 2014; Curtis & Jaboneta 2019; Kholiq 2020). They categorize and classify objects based on their experiences of what those objects can do; for example, are they "throwable," "bangable," "hideable," or "moveable" (Athey 2007)?

Understanding schemas allows teachers to better appreciate children's roles as active meaning makers. Knowledge is not merely found in children's surroundings; rather, it is constructed by their experiences interacting with the environment and the provocations set before them (Arnold 2015). Teachers' appreciation for the functions of a schema creates a more positive image of the child as "capable, strong, and determined, rather than as infuriating and repetitive" (Grenier 2014, 439).

Boulton and Thomas (2022) consider the early childhood curriculum in light of children's schemas and describe curricular innovations that start with the child and build upon what they can do. However, in group settings, teachers will most likely learn to observe children's developing schemas during play. This is a key to better understanding schemas and how they impact children's development and learning over time (Arnold 2015; Atherton & Nutbrown 2016; Curtis & Jaboneta 2019; Siraj-Blatchford & Brock 2019).

Schema play is an essential and naturally occurring activity that forms the architecture of children's thinking and knowledge. It is made visible through the materials and experiences that appear to fascinate children and fuel their motivations (Siraj-Blatchford & Brock 2019). When toddlers ceaselessly roll across the floor, dump out containers, throw things, and walk around carrying a favored item, they are developing ideas, acquiring new information, and building a more sophisticated understanding of how the world works

(see "Examples of Schema Play" on page 37). As early childhood educators learn to recognize schema play, they begin to glimpse the concepts that children are exploring (Louis et al. 2018) and can begin to formulate theories about how to help children lead their own learning (Arnold 2015).

> *Schema play* is an essential and naturally occurring activity that forms the architecture of children's thinking and knowledge.

Seeing Behaviors Through the Lens of Schema Play

Manifestations of schema play can be perceived by adults as problematic (McDermott 2020). In our work, we are often called upon to help practitioners "get control" of the children in their learning settings. Some teachers we have worked with report great frustration with toddlers who do not play with materials as intended or who seek out activities that "don't belong" in their settings, such as throwing, climbing, or engaging in other big body movements. In these situations, educators' initial requests are to brainstorm how to stop what they see as challenging behaviors and achieve greater compliance from the children. Teachers sometimes attempt to encourage "good" behavior by offering a favored toy or even promising to tell a child's family at pick-up time that they had a "good" day.

Instead, we challenge those who care for and educate toddlers to seek deeper insights into how children's behaviors are communicating new intentions for discovery. We continue to be inspired by Jim Greenman's (2007) reminder that when adults find a child's activity bothersome, that child is usually just doing their job to encounter the world and develop their mental and bodily powers fully. The foremost method children use to do this is through play.

Play is essential for all children and promotes joyful learning that fosters a variety of competencies, including self-regulation, language, cognitive, and social and emotional growth (NAEYC 2020). Yet

Examples of Schema Play

More than likely, you have observed schema play in your toddler setting. The following chart includes categories and examples of schema behaviors most aligned with Curtis & Jaboneta (2019) and based on the authors' observations. If you have observed children repeating these behaviors with particular interest or fascination, you most likely have witnessed the development of a particular schema.

Schema	Schema Play
Transporting	Moving or pushing objects or toys around the room; carrying objects; filling containers with objects and moving them from place to place.
Transforming	Spreading paint onto paper or various surfaces; combining substances during messy play; combining parts to make new creations.
Trajectory	Running, swinging, pushing, and pulling; throwing items. (Because of safety concerns, this behavior requires careful supervision.)
Rotation and circularity	Making curved and circular lines with art materials; fascination with objects with wheels or that spin; rolling their bodies or spinning around.
Enclosing and enveloping	Hiding objects; creating enclosures/fences for toy animals; covering up with a blanket; putting items into holes.
Connecting and disconnecting	Playing with connecting blocks or toys; using tape or string to join things together; bringing together piles of things; kicking down block constructions.
Orientation and perspective	Climbing up high; crawling underneath furniture; placing objects (transparent cloth, colored glass) close to the eyes and looking through them; hanging upside down.

Based on Curtis & Jaboneta 2019.

valuing play demands that we continually investigate how it evolves and functions as children grow. The play of a toddler does not look the same as the play of a preschooler. Therefore, practitioners should remain curious about play, how it functions, its ways of telling a child's story, and how it reveals developmental characteristics and motivations. Every moment of appreciating and contemplating children's observed play yields dividends toward teaching young children well (Arnold 2015).

Understanding schema play and practicing deeper awareness of how children are using these explorations can help shape educators' perceptions of behaviors that they may find challenging. Research suggests that schema play allows practitioners to better see patterns of cognition. This is because it represents toddlers' thinking as they "actively construct and develop their understanding and knowledge through their actions" (Brierley 2018, 145). When educators recognize schema

play, they can assume a welcoming stance and begin to plan affirming responses that empower and extend children's explorations.

For example, the opening vignettes illustrate the actions of teachers who became frustrated by children's behaviors while exploring water, markers, and their bodies' positions. If viewed through the lens of schemas and schema play, these teachers could have advanced children's learning rather than turning to more punitive and restrictive measures. Consider:

> As Mr. Chavez watches children splash at the water table, he recognizes that they are investigating the schema of *trajectory*, or propelling items from one place to another (e.g., Curtis & Jaboneta 2019). To facilitate this play, he plans to take small groups of children outside, where they can splash from a small basin of water. Indoors, he provides cups at the water table for children to pour water into and out of. He also provides dish

soap bottles, so children can squirt water into the table. As they explore, Mr. Chavez guides their investigations of the force needed to move the water and marvels with them as they encounter surprises. He sets towels and sponges nearby, so the children can help wipe up any spills.

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To support and extend children's investigations of *rotation and circularity* (e.g., Curtis & Jaboneta 2019), Ms. Montgomery covers a table with butcher paper, then offers a variety of art materials for children to make large circular motions. She also offers circle-shaped materials for tracing. As she watches children's schema play, Ms. Montgomery makes plans to incorporate twirling and circle dancing into music and movement experiences.

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Rather than assuming that children are misbehaving during center time, Ms. Weber and Ms. Wong begin to engage with those who are lying on the floor or underneath furniture. They understand that the children are investigating the schema of *orientation* (e.g., Curtis & Jaboneta 2019). "What do you see from down here?" Ms. Weber asks, joining a child on the floor. The two teachers begin to identify areas in their setting that would allow children to experience different viewpoints—such as indoor play areas, climbing mats, and outdoor play spaces. They plan to provide large cardboard boxes

for the children to explore. They even consider installing an elevated platform in the room that children can walk across or crawl under.

Considering Context as Children Learn

Providing appropriate learning experiences for young children rests upon educators' understanding of child development theory and research. Toddler practitioners do well when they recognize that children's learning comes primarily through their senses and motor activities rather than listening or obeying. As Atherton and Nutbrown assert, "toddlers learn with their whole bodies and all their senses, they are physical thinkers" (2016, 65). Acknowledging both the toddler's whole-body alignment toward the world and each new experience are fundamental to an educator's ability to support, rather than hinder, development.

However, social and cultural contexts also affect child development and learning. Rather than relying solely on established benchmarks or using a rigid set of expectations for all toddlers, educators must consider children's individual experiences and waves of development. To ensure that they are viewing children from a strengths-based perspective, early childhood educators must understand how the commonalities of children's development and learning reflect their social and cultural frameworks (NAEYC 2020).

For example, while play is a fundamental way in which children interpret and make sense of their experiences, it can vary significantly depending on a child's race, culture, and other contexts (NAEYC 2020). Educators must create accessible learning experiences that are reflective of each unique child (Atherton & Nutbrown 2016). Intentional communication with families can provide many opportunities for recognizing and supporting the interests that emerge during children's schema play (Ilic 2014). Likewise, linking a child's home culture and context extends opportunities for children's learning both at home and at early learning programs (Meade & Cubey 2008).

Recognizing New Possibilities

Through their schema play, toddlers are "experimenting with what they can do unaided or independently" (Grimmer 2017, 14). Embracing the significance of this play can liberate educators to find meaning—even newfound importance—in behaviors they once considered difficult and wished to change. Instead, they can deepen their work with children to enhance cognitive, social and emotional, and physical development (Brierley 2018).

Acknowledging and building upon toddlers' schema play aids in the reconstruction of adult mindsets and perceived biases, resulting in relationships that are liberating instead of misunderstood (Grimmer 2017). To encourage and build upon toddlers' schema play, educators can adopt the following strategies:

> **Slow down.** While routines and transitions are valuable ways to pace the day, it is crucial to recognize that following a child's lead in the moment is not wasted time. Educators can practice being more present and attentive to children by noticing when a toddler is interested in a particular movement or drawn to interesting sights or sounds. During these moments of wonder, teachers can express their interest or awe as well. Such shared experiences give children the permission and approval to fully immerse themselves in rich explorations.

> **Attend to relationships.** Toddlers are hungry for interactions with adults. Educators can encourage this by staying on a child's level and listening and speaking with them intently ("You are showing me how fast the car rolls! Thank you!"). Offering help when a toddler is seeking a new experience also communicates a desire for interaction ("I see you are enjoying caring for the baby. Would you like a blanket to wrap her in?").

> **Observe and document.** Close observation and documentation help to guide teachers as they plan for and invite children to participate in play and other learning activities (Curtis et al. 2013). To carefully and consistently record schema play at work, educators can use photography to capture experiences and honor toddlers' perspectives, meaning, and values. This documentation can be shared with families.

> **Enrich the physical environment.** Toddlers will use whatever is available for schema play: Household items, recycled materials, and remnants from nature are captivating to them (Daly & Beloglovsky 2016). The outdoors offers multiple opportunities for facilitating schema play and stimulating all the senses. Sand and water, blocks, and other open-ended materials allow for creativity and problem solving (Boulton & Thomas 2022).

> **Consider safety.** If a particular exploration poses safety concerns, educators can offer adaptations to allow it to continue safely. For example, if children are exploring trajectory by throwing items, teachers can collect balls or other items that can be thrown safely outdoors. They also can identify a target or container that children can throw toward.

Understanding schema play and practicing deeper awareness of how children are using these explorations can help shape educators' perceptions of behaviors that they may find challenging.

Moment to moment, toddlers are intuitively working to investigate, adapt, and construct meaning. By becoming aware of schema play in the early years, educators can discover new significance in the behaviors that they observe daily—even those they find frustrating. Learning about schema play helps educators develop a deeper respect for and understanding of why and how children play. Teaching can become dramatically more interesting as we realize the sophisticated curriculum that children are inviting us to participate in each day.

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Supporting Self-Regulation and Autonomy in Kindergarten

One Teacher's Journey

Amy Blessing

Control and classroom management: Two things often thought of as synonymous. At least they were for me in my early years of teaching. I felt that the more my classroom ran like a well-oiled machine, the better my classroom management was. That the more I controlled every detail, the better my children would behave, and the more they would learn. That without this level of control, the classroom would end up in chaos. I now know the opposite is true.

As Maya Angelou has been credited with saying, "Now that I know better, I do better." My own growth and learning have allowed me to make changes to my teaching practices that have had a lasting impact on my students' experiences. I have discovered that when I empower my students to make choices and learn to take responsibility for their own learning, the result is not chaos as I had feared. It is something profoundly more powerful. My students strengthen their executive function skills, gain independence, and become each other's cheerleaders along their learning journeys.

A Peek Inside My Micromanaged Classroom

If you had visited my kindergarten classroom in my first four to seven years of teaching, you would have seen several efficient, strategic systems of management in place. No longer a beginning teacher, I had gained enough experience to fine-tune my systems. My young students knew exactly where to be and what they should be doing at all times. They did what I told them to do. They had assigned seats; each table was a different color, with matching table baskets, morning journals, and name tags of the same color.

The students came in every morning and went to their tables, sitting with the same classmates daily. They worked in their morning journals until it was carpet time. Then they came to the carpet and sat on their designated squares in nice, neat rows. During literacy and math stations, students stayed with their assigned groups and rotated through the stations throughout the week, following the designated rotation plan.

These assigned table seats and reading and math groups were carefully designed, ensuring I could make each group compatible. Personalities fit with each other, or students of similar strengths and abilities worked together. In other words, I tried to avoid any potential conflicts between children.

After station time came what should have been child-led center play time. I felt I was giving my students choice by implementing a color-coded ticket system. Centers around the room were designated by a different color: The block center was red, dramatic play was green, and so on. Each student had a collection of colored tickets to match each center.

They could "choose" where to work that day by using their corresponding ticket, but once they used it, they did not get it back until they had used all of their other tickets. It did not matter if their block structure was unfinished. It would be a week or more before I allowed them back to the block center. Chances were, their block structure was no longer there, or their plan for building was a long-forgotten thought. And if they wanted to work with a specific friend, they were out of luck if that friend did not have the same tickets remaining.

I cringe even now as I write this, almost 20 years later. While my intent was to ensure that my students experienced all of the learning opportunities I provided, I was actually hindering their development and learning. The students only had to blindly follow this system without taking any ownership of their learning. My efficient, extremely micromanaged system did not give them a chance to develop and strengthen the skills that arguably were the most important: Their executive function skills.

Reading, Writing, Math, and . . . Executive Function Skills?

What are executive function skills, and why do they matter? Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child (n.d.) explains executive function and self-regulation skills as the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses. (For more on executive function, visit NAEYC.org/yc/summer2024.)

These skills are exactly what we all need to succeed in school and beyond. Children who have not yet developed these critical skills typically struggle in the classroom environment; self-regulation skills allow children to remain focused and persist through daily challenges in a rigorous classroom (Oertig & Hartmann 2014). Educators generally have a clear plan for developing literacy and math skills but not often for self-regulation and executive function skills.

Yet research indicates that "children aren't born with these skills—they are born with the potential to develop them. Some children may need more support than others to develop these skills" (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). Research shows that self-regulation abilities are strong indicators and predictors of future success in school and life (Ritchie et al. 2009). It is the job of educators to provide that support for development.

Empowering Young Learners: The Power of Choice

High-quality professional development experiences centered on brain research and child development pushed me to take a closer look at my teaching practices. As I realized how my emphasis on control was hindering my students from developing autonomy and regulation skills, I began to make changes. Letting go of control and empowering students did not create a free-for-all, as I had feared. I found that the more responsibility I gave my young learners, the more they rose to the challenge. They were eager to develop their independence and help each other along the way. Behaviors and conflicts between children seemed to decrease, or perhaps the children were better equipped to handle them. Class meetings allowed for modeling and role-playing different scenarios that my students faced as they were given more independence and choice. We created a class plan with agreed-upon behaviors and expectations that every student signed. Our plan was posted in the room and referred to throughout the year. Previously, I had tried to prevent any conflicts through seating arrangements and groupings, which did not allow children the ability to develop problem-solving strategies when conflicts did arise.

My students now experience a wide range of learning opportunities and settings, working with all of their classmates throughout the day or week. I set my goals and objectives for the week and carefully plan intentional learning opportunities using a variety of materials and methods. Students then make choices regarding learning activities and materials, following their own interests and building on their strengths.

Students have ample time to revisit learning activities where they feel successful, which builds the confidence they need for more challenging tasks. They recognize and celebrate each other's strengths, often working in mixed-ability groups. Organization and structure are still evident in my classroom, but that structure now supports student choice and self-regulation.

Classroom Foundations for Executive Function Skills

Three factors support children's development of executive function skills: positive relationships; scaffolded learning opportunities that focus on all areas of development; and a safe, joyful learning environment (Center on the Developing Child 2012). I am intentional about all three of these factors in my classroom.

Developing and building a strong classroom community lays the foundation for positive peer relationships and relationships between children and adults. In my classroom, we believe in a growth mindset and the power of "yet." The children remind each other that they may not know something "yet," that the more we practice, the stronger we are, and that we have the strength to learn new skills. They celebrate when a classmate achieves a goal.

I design activities and learning opportunities to support the children's executive function skills. I make sure to include experiences that encourage social connection, support creativity and child-directed play, are scaffolded for individualized learning, and encourage children to learn from each other (Center on the Developing Child 2012).

Classrooms are where children spend most of their time during the school week. These places must provide a sense of safety and joy. They must be places where children are assured that mistakes are part of everyone's learning journey and are not to be feared, that we are all in this together, and that each of us is working on learning or achieving something. Classrooms should be places of joyful learning, allowing for creativity and exploration.

Getting Started: Strategies for Developing Self-Regulation and Student Choice

Changes in my teaching practices did not happen overnight. Letting go of control as a teacher can be intimidating. If you recognize yourself in the description of my early practices and want to make changes, give yourself grace as you move forward in

your own learning trajectory. Here are some practical changes that made a difference in my classroom. Decide what works for you with the particular children you work with as a place to begin. As you see the power of student choice in your own teaching, you will develop your own strategies to further incorporate into your practice. (For more on this, see "Creating Joyful Learning Within State and Local Standards" on page 47.)

Unassign Seats

The use of assigned seats and carpet spots provided structure for behavior control and smooth routines in my classroom, but it created unintended conflicts. Instruction was often interrupted as children complained that someone was "in their spot," when in fact it was simply that their classmate's toe had crept over the carpet line into their assigned space. Now we have a solid color carpet without any designated spots, and children sit where they feel comfortable. Through modeling and guiding, instead of the whining tone of "You're in my spot," I now hear children saying, "There's room here, sit with me" or "Can you move over a little bit? I'm squished." They demonstrate respect for each other as they respond to their classmates' requests. They are developing body awareness and ways to solve problems, both important life skills.

Flexible seating around the rest of the room provides opportunities for children to work with materials in a variety of settings and with different classmates. They are no longer bound to their assigned seats. They group themselves based on activities and materials. For example, our morning routine when the children arrive used to consist solely of journal writing at their assigned tables. Now children select their morning work from a number of choices before we begin our morning meeting together. They can read books in the classroom library center, work on a Chromebook, play a partner math game, complete a puzzle with a friend, or make a book using the art and writing center materials. Within a structure and routine, there is plenty of choice available.

Offer a Variety of Ways to Work

Flexible seating means more than unassigned seats. It provides opportunities for students to work in different positions around the room. Our classroom, for example, includes low tables for sitting on the

floor, tables to stand at, lap desks, floor cushions, window seats, wobble stools, and traditional tables and chairs. Each learning space has clear expectations and guidelines on how to use the area. Giving children the opportunity to explore these different learning spots allows them to develop their preferences and understand how each option makes them feel. I have students who prefer the wobble stools while others prefer the chairs. Some love to work at the standing tables while others like to kneel at the low table. They are regulating themselves when they make these choices, often choosing to work where they know they have the most success.

Provide Open Access to Materials

Students have access to materials they may need in different resource stations around the room. They know where to find glue, scissors, staplers, tape, dry erase markers and erasers, pencils, and so on. They know how to choose and get what they need to complete a task. By providing them independence in gathering materials, I am helping them develop the ability to plan and complete a task. Art materials are also set out in a way that encourages the development of self-regulation skills; for example, instead of carefully pouring each color of paint into individual cups ahead of time, I store the paint in condiment squeeze bottles, and children choose their own colors to squeeze into ice cube trays. I no longer worry that they might mix the colors; instead, I share their excitement when they discover new colors—because they were given autonomy in the art center.

Add Tools for Easy Cleanup

Materials are also available for children to take care of their workspaces. Children use small dustpans and brooms to clean up snack crumbs or art center sequins. Baby wipes are perfect for wiping up spilled paint or juice. With tools that are easy to use, children are better equipped to find solutions to problems. They jump in to help each other take care of the classroom spaces and materials.

Personalize Spaces for Saving Work

Planning and goal setting take time. I want children to be able to set goals that extend beyond one day of learning. I think back to when I did not allow my students to return to a center until the following week.

Why would they ever have planned beyond that day? Now my students can save and return to their work, day after day, until they feel they have accomplished their goals. The block center always has structures up so children can return and continue building. We clean up only when it is agreed that everyone is done working on the structure. LEGO structures are kept on trays with names on sticky notes, so children can add to them over time. Students have their own art drawer where they keep any unfinished drawings or artwork, a work folder for their literacy station work, and a writing folder for writer's workshop pieces. They know that their work is valued and respected. They know how and where to find their work to return to and continue their plans. Reluctance to clean up and transition to new activities, which can often result in disruptive behaviors, is lessened when children trust that cleanup does not mean the loss of their unfinished work. We rarely hear "But I'm not done!" anymore.

Provide Choice Even in "Must-Do" Tasks

Our daily schedule includes both open-ended, child-directed play (centers like blocks, dramatic play, and art) and more closed-task, teacher-directed activities such as literacy and math stations. Allowing student choice even in these teacher-directed activities increases students' engagement in the activities and continues to support their self-regulation skills. Student choice during these times does not necessarily include the choice to not complete the task, but rather when and in what order they will complete the tasks. Tasks may be checked off a job choice board as they are completed. This also allows me to present a variety of activities that address one specific skill. For example, if we are working on the math skill of counting on, I can teach and present multiple partner games that incorporate this same skill. My students can choose which game they would like to play, even if they make the same choice each day. No matter which choice is made, I know all of them will practice the targeted skill.

Conclusion

A strong classroom community where children are empowered, have continuous opportunities to develop their self-regulation and executive function skills, and experience the celebration of their strengths is actually

the "well-oiled machine" I was striving for all those years ago. More than 275 teachers and administrators have observed my demonstration classroom over the years, and these visitors often express amazement at my students' independence. They notice the high time on task and deep student engagement. But most of all, they observe the power of joyful learning. Let's strive for that to be the case for all children.

About the Author

Amy Blessing, MEd, NBCT, is a kindergarten teacher in southeastern North Carolina. She has taught kindergarten for over 25 years and has worked with statewide professional development initiatives as well as national organizations to effect change for children.

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This article is excerpted from NAEYC's recently published book *Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable and Joyful Learning in Kindergarten*. For more information about the book, visit NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/books/dap-focus-kindergarten.

Creating Joyful Learning Within State and Local Standards

Amy Blessing

We've all heard the statement "kindergarten is the new first grade." However, curricular requirements, daily schedule mandates, and the expectation of uniform instruction delivery can make it feel comparable to what used to be considered appropriate for second or third grade.

Twenty-five years ago, when I began teaching kindergarten, our day included several hours of play, including ample recess and outdoor time. We taught phonological awareness through finger plays and songs, with the expectation that children would know most of the alphabet's letters and sounds by the end of the year. We focused on shared experiences with emergent reading and writing, and we still had time for naps! We had state standards, knew the goals for year-end expectations, and used local formative assessments to gather data on progress and achievements.

Today, state and national standards have increased what is expected for kindergarten students to know and be able to do by year's end. We have standardized assessment tools that allow us to look at data on a broader scale. While these changes are not negative, their outcomes do have unintended consequences.

Research continues to show that kindergartners thrive in educational environments that offer them choice and that promote active, engaged, and joyful learning (Phillips & Scrinzi 2024). While kindergarten teachers must know and meet the early learning standards and other mandates of their states, we also must consider children's contexts and plan for and encourage them to develop agency in their learning (see "Supporting Self-Regulation and Autonomy in Kindergarten: One Teacher's Journey" on page 42). Both are part of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2020). Following, I offer strategies for ways educators can intentionally plan for joyful learning experiences that align with district and statewide requirements.

Link Instruction to Standards

It's imperative that teachers can identify the specific standards and skills that children are developing as they play and make choices. This requires them to intentionally plan activities and provide opportunities for children to learn in playful, engaged ways. For example, play materials might focus on responses to curriculum-mandated read alouds or other literacy instruction. This might look like

› Inviting children to build the setting of a story in the block center, adding details to retell the main events. I include a copy of the book we have read along with props and materials that are linked to the story (such as Mrs. Wishy-Washy finger puppets or figurines of the three little pigs and the big bad wolf). With prompting and support, children are able to retell familiar stories, including key details, and identify a story's characters, settings, and major events (skills that are included in the kindergarten standards for our state).

› Providing open-ended prompts at the paint easel that relate to a specific unit or topic. When my class did a bird study, I provided photos of birds from magazines and old nature calendars. These allowed children to look closely at details to create paintings to accompany their informational writing, which is included in the standards focused on informational text.

› Placing writing materials in different play areas, so children can practice early writing and reading skills. My students, for example, draw pictures of their finished LEGO creations and write a label or sentence about them. They write captions to be displayed with their paintings. They create signs and labels for their block center structures. These activities meet the standard of using a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose texts while allowing children to practice emergent writing skills in meaningful ways.

Communicate About Children's Learning

I find it helpful to hang small posters throughout the room that highlight how each learning area connects to specific standards. For example, the poster in the block area lists the math and literacy skills that are addressed when children play with purpose in this area. These posters are helpful when administrators, families, university interns and students, and classroom volunteers visit our room. They outline approaches to learning in various content and developmental areas, including math, science, language and literacy, physical, and social and emotional. They include questions adults can ask to promote children's work and thinking, and they tie to the state standards addressed in each domain (dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/office-early-learning/kindergarten).

Besides linking to academic standards, teachers can also point out how children's activities are encouraging other developmental skills. These might include

> **Fine motor:** Working with and manipulating playdough and small objects like LEGOs strengthen the hand muscles needed for writing.

> **Executive function:** Designing block structures and revisiting them to add to, make changes, or rebuild require memory and planning. Impulse control is necessary to not accidentally knock structures down.

> **Social and emotional development:** Child-guided play requires students to collaborate and resolve conflicts.

Modify Curricular Formats

The type of curricula used by a school may take away from children's autonomy. For example, some are designed so that all children are at their seats for a portion of the lesson and working on the same task at the same time. Name tags are provided for assigned seating; practice books and dry erase boards are needed for most lessons. These decrease children's agency.

As I work with the curricula adopted by my district, I intentionally consider each requirement in connection to the children I'm teaching. I adapt lessons as needed, so I can be responsive to each learner. This includes letting children use shared materials and storing

individualized materials in a consistent way. Children have access to the materials they need, but they're still able to choose where to sit.

I also intentionally teach children how to gather and pass out materials smoothly and efficiently: Materials are stored in a central location so that children can line up without clustering, gather materials quickly, and head to a seat. Alternatively, I may put tubs of materials at each table and choose a group leader who is responsible for passing out the materials that day. Because we don't lose instructional time, assigned seats are not mandated to me.

Promote Children's Agency

Educators may face the expectation that "instruction" be explicitly or directly given every minute of the school day and follow a prescribed curriculum. This tends to be whole-group instruction, which may or may not include ample opportunities for student dialogue, choice, and play.

To counter this view, educators can intentionally plan for and provide opportunities to invite more agency. One way to do this is to start with the end goal of instruction and work backward. Educators can ask themselves:

> What do I ultimately want children to know and be able to do at the end of a unit?

> How can I adapt some of the steps necessary to reach that goal to include student choice?

> Could children choose the materials they use or the order in which they complete tasks?

Knowing and unpacking the standards for instruction will help educators prioritize children's needs and plan and design learning opportunities that meet local or state standards.

Articulate Choices

I never want the reasoning behind my choices to be "because I just do it this way." It's critical that educators know and can articulate the "why" behind their classroom practices. For example, when a university intern or other classroom observer asks why I don't have assigned seating, I share how children build executive function skills when they can choose where they sit. When asked why I don't use a token system for

behavior management, I'm ready to share the successes I've had with building classroom culture and intrinsic motivation without one.

Depending on the school environment, educators may need to take smaller steps toward change. This may look like providing opportunities for play linked to the culmination of a unit or during pause points in the scheduled curriculum. It may be adding centers to the classroom slowly—first focusing on content-heavy centers like literacy, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and block building, then adding dramatic play and art as buy-in and support increase. While the goal is for children to create and lead their own play daily, this is a great place to start.

About the Author

Amy Blessing, MEd, NBCT, is a kindergarten teacher in southeastern North Carolina. She has taught kindergarten for over 25 years and has worked with statewide professional development initiatives as well as national organizations to effect change for children.

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Write for *Young Children!*

Young Children, NAEYC's award-winning, peer-reviewed journal, is published four times per year and welcomes articles by teachers, researchers, and other professionals dedicated to early childhood education. Our updated topics for 2026 highlight our continued commitment to supporting educational excellence and meeting the needs of all children, birth through third grade. *Young Children* articles are grounded in current research and provide inspiring—yet practical—ideas for educators. For more information, visit **NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/yc/writing.**

Issue Date	Topic	Article Due Date
Spring 2026	From the Pages of YC: Reflections on NAEYC's 100th Anniversary	March 3, 2025
Summer 2026	Toward Intentional Teaching: The Need for Educator Agency	June 2, 2025

Understanding and Supporting Children's Behavior Through a Sensory Processing Lens

Tarima Levine and Victoria Ozeir

Andrea teaches in a mixed-age, 3s and 4s room. She describes Tyler, a 3-year-old boy, as "always on the go." He climbs up the cubbies during arrival time, moves from seat to seat during snack time, and throws his body onto the classroom bean bags throughout the day. When on the playground, he's particularly active. He climbs higher on the play equipment ladder than he can climb down on his own. He goes down the slide as fast as he can. On the sling swing, he rocks his body back and forth. At times, it seems as though he might fall. When it's quiet time, Tyler has difficulty calming down, but a heavy blanket and a nearby adult rubbing his back usually help to settle him.

To some, Tyler may seem to exhibit difficulty following directions and respecting rules. However, his behavior provides important information about how he experiences the world and how he approaches learning experiences. Searching for

the meaning behind children's behaviors is an effective early childhood practice and fosters responsive learning experiences for all children. Because various factors can influence a child's behavior and young children experience rapid development across various domains, it can be challenging to determine which are at play during a given situation. Educators can apply a *sensory processing lens* to consider the relationship between a child's experiences of and responses to sensory stimuli and their subsequent behaviors. By considering children's sensory experiences when interpreting their behaviors, educators can develop strategies and approaches with intention.

We (the authors) create adult learning experiences to support strengths-based, learner-centered, and equitable educational practices. We work at the Bank Street Education Center, a division of Bank Street College of Education that provides professional learning, coaching, and strategic planning for organizations and school districts. We draw on our experiences as former classroom educators, early interventionists, teacher educators, program leaders, and members of an interdisciplinary team to support children's development and growth, including sensory processing. Professional resources that address how children process and respond to sensory stimuli may focus on learners who experience developmental variations. However, here, we discuss the use of the sensory processing lens as an approach early childhood educators in a variety of settings can integrate into their work with any child from birth to age 6.

In this article, we provide a brief overview of the senses and sensory processing and discuss children's sensory seeking and sensory avoiding behaviors (Little et al. 2017). We also offer five strategies to help educators apply the sensory processing lens in their own settings. In addition, we share what these strategies look like in action by sharing more about Tyler and how one of his educators used a sensory processing lens to understand and address his sensory needs.

How Sensory Experiences Can Influence Children's Behaviors

When educators focus on children's individuality and strengths, they can advance equity in early childhood education settings (NAEYC 2019, 2020). As children develop in their abilities to integrate complex sensory processes and experiences over time, it is important for educators to understand their individual sensitivities and preferences. By acknowledging the diverse ways young children process sensory information, educators can create rich and inclusive settings and promote behaviors that are important for learning, communicating that they value each and every child.

The discussion of children's developing sensory systems and processes is complex. In this section, we provide a broad overview of the senses and sensory processing (see "A Brief Overview of Sensory Processing in Young Children" on page 52). We also focus on two elements of children's sensory processing patterns: sensory seeking and sensory avoiding behaviors (see Little et al. 2017). We share why children might engage in these behaviors based on their individual sensory thresholds and how educators can communicate with families to learn about children's unique sensory processing patterns.

Sensory Processing Patterns

Throughout their development, children must attend to various stimuli simultaneously. They are learning to filter out unnecessary sensory information and respond to important information with appropriate and necessary movements and behaviors (Little et al. 2017). Children's responses to information can be attributed to their unique sensory thresholds (Kong & Moreno 2018). They might become distracted or withdrawn in the context of sensory experiences that cause them to feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable. A *sensory processing pattern* describes the actions and behaviors that an individual exhibits in response to their detection of and sensitivity to various sensory stimuli (see Dunn 2007, Little et al. 2017, and Kong & Moreno 2018 for more about sensory processing patterns).

Some children can have difficulty detecting certain sensory stimuli; that is, they have a *high threshold* (Little et al. 2017). They may crave specific sensory input and engage in *sensory seeking behaviors* to

A Brief Overview of Sensory Processing in Young Children

Our sensory systems allow us to perceive and process information about our environment and are online from birth (Mahesh et al. 2023). The commonly known senses—touch, taste, sight, smell, and sound—are involved in *exteroception*, or our "perception of the external world" (Goral et al. 2024). From infancy, children use exteroception to engage with sensory stimuli, such as light, sounds, smells, touch, and pressure. Children's brains process and interpret these sensory stimuli as sensory information, which provides them with details about their environments and informs their actions and behaviors (NIH 2007; Kong & Moreno 2018). As young children grow, they gain more command of their sensory processing abilities, allowing them to organize and regulate sensory information to "guide goal-oriented behavioral responses" (Kearney & Lanius 2022, 2).

The sensory systems involved in *interoception* allow children to perceive their internal states and can include messages about body temperature, pain, hunger, toileting urges, fatigue, stress, emotions, and so on (Joshi et al. 2021; Goral et al. 2024). Interoception also provides information about the body's internal functions, such as those that involve hormones, immunity, and interior organs (Biel 2014; Goral et al. 2024).

The Vestibular and Proprioceptive Systems

The vestibular and proprioceptive systems are involuntary and work together to create a "sixth sense" (Cullen & Zobeiri 2021; Kearney & Lanius 2022). *Proprioception* allows children to be aware of where their bodies' trunks and limbs are in space and in relation to bodies other than their own (Kearney & Lanius 2022). It also allows them to be aware of where their body parts are in relation to each other, which helps babies to find their feet with their hands or toddlers to raise a cup to their mouths (Biel 2014).

Vestibular perception is complex and involves various bodily systems that are important in children's understanding of themselves as separate from others (Lopez 2015; Kearney & Lanius 2022). For this article, it is important to know that it allows children to seamlessly incorporate head motion and to interpret their bodies within gravity and space. It also provides children with the sensory information for making a sequence of movements needed to complete an action (Biel 2014; Kearney & Lanius 2022; Cullen & Zobeiri 2024).

Together, these two systems help children maintain posture, hold their heads up, register that they are walking on an incline, and generally balance as they move. These faculties also help children gauge how fast they are moving and how much force and speed they need to apply for certain movements. They play an important role in developing gross and fine motor skills as children navigate spaces and manipulate objects. For example, a toddler who trips on a rug could recover their balance and keep walking, whereas, earlier in their development, they might have fallen. Their developing proprioception and vestibular perception work together to keep them physically safe by helping them engage their motor responses with greater ease (Kearney & Lanius 2022).

feel regulated and alert. For example, children who require heightened oral stimulation might gravitate toward crunchy foods or chew on their clothing and hair. Some children more readily detect certain stimuli; that is, they have a *low threshold* (Dunn 2007; Little et al. 2017). They may require less sensory input from specific sources and might engage in *sensory avoidant behaviors*, such as "moving away from noisy spaces and getting out of crowded rooms in which they are being touched" to maintain a regulated state (Dunn 2007, 87).

Importantly, children can engage in sensory seeking behaviors in some contexts and sensory avoiding behaviors in other contexts (Kong & Moreno 2018). For example, a child may have a high tolerance for noise at home but a lower threshold at school. It is helpful for

educators to observe children's preferences based on context and situation rather than labeling a child as sensory seeking or sensory avoidant.

When Children Have Difficult Sensory Experiences

Early childhood educators who spend time with infants may observe that they are often sensitive to sensory stimuli and may require coregulation experiences from adults to support them in feeling calm. However, as young children grow and become more familiar with their sensory preferences, they continue to require coregulation experiences from adults that include "soothing and comforting sensory input" and the modeling of self-regulation and coping skills (Kearney & Lanius 2022, 10). This supports children to self-regulate with increasing independence in ways that align with their unique sensory processing patterns (Kong & Moreno 2018; Kearney & Lanius 2022).

Despite coregulation experiences, children may demonstrate behaviors that indicate sensory processing challenges. For example, if a child has a low tolerance for auditory stimulation, it may be difficult for them to focus within a learning setting where they hear multiple sounds simultaneously. If a child has a high auditory tolerance, they may speak loudly, create loud noises, or seek loud environments with multiple sounds.

When educators observe a child's sensory avoidant behaviors, such as steering clear of certain textures and foods, groups of peers, and loud or startling noises, they can consider the child's discomfort in those situations rather than assuming a lack of compliance or interest (Kong & Moreno 2018). In addition, when a child engages in sensory seeking behaviors, such as difficulty sitting still, feeling the urge to touch objects or people, and crashing their bodies into objects, educators can consider the child's need for increased stimulation rather than assuming these behaviors indicate impulsivity or difficulty with self-management.

Children can have difficulty identifying and describing the internal feelings, physical sensations, and thoughts that may be contributing to their behaviors. Educators can help children recognize and share their internal experiences by narrating the changes they observe in children, such as those related to temperature or energy levels. For example, if a child immediately lies down on a rug after returning from playing outside, an educator can say: "It looks like your body wants to rest. Your body must be tired after all that running outside!" In addition, when a child is exhibiting a heightened response to a sensory experience, educators can remind the child of strategies that worked for them in the past and invite them to engage in the strategy again. To further scaffold children's regulation, educators can offer additional choices that align with the child's sensory needs.

Understanding a Child's Sensory Needs Beyond the Learning Setting

Educators and families are essential partners in early childhood spaces, and open communication about a child's sensory needs can create reciprocity between home and early learning settings (NAEYC 2019, 2020). It is important for educators to partner with family members, specialists, and colleagues who know children in different contexts and can help provide a fuller picture of children's sensory patterns and effective responses (Noddings 2017). For example, a family member can share what they have observed at home and offer insights into their child's previous experiences in other learning settings. They can also indicate if their child is working with a pediatric clinician, occupational therapist, and/or early interventionist who might be able to provide additional information.

Context plays an important role in a child's capacity to engage in self-regulation. Different environments, including home and school, can present various expectations and norms and can impact children's regulatory states. We have found that unfamiliar or unpredictable experiences can heighten children's behavioral responses. For example, while home is a familiar place, a family gathering or celebration with many people and voices in the same crowded space can be a challenging sensory environment for a child. In learning settings, special events, while organized with young children in mind, can still create challenges with increased auditory stimuli, restricted spaces that constrain movement, and larger groups of people in close proximity. Educators can consider all of this information as they work to identify strategies to support children's sensory needs.

Using a Sensory Processing Lens

Educators can use a sensory processing lens to implement intentional observations, planning, and teaching strategies that align with the unique sensory patterns of each child in their settings. We have found that a responsive practice can include considering the role that sensory processing has in children's behaviors and considering strategies and supports to address children's specific sensory needs. In our experience, applying a sensory processing lens requires a shift from primarily focusing on behavior management and children's obedience to focusing on responsiveness, relationship building, and an inquiry-based stance.

When educators have opportunities to engage in inquiry and to establish authentic relationships with children, they can better apply a sensory processing lens. Careful attention to the situations and conditions that precede a child's behavior allows educators to understand and honor each child's unique sensory processing pattern. Educators can also observe and record details about their settings and practices and examine which environmental factors, routines, and interactions may contribute to children's particular behavioral responses (Kong & Moreno 2018; Cohen et al. 2024). In the following section, we share more about Tyler and how his educator addressed his need for sensory stimulation. In addition, we discuss five strategies for early childhood educators to use when applying a sensory processing lens in their own settings.

Engage in and Model Self-Regulation

To modulate her internal experiences as she works with children, Andrea has worked to develop a practice of staying present by calming her mind, naming anxieties and concerns, and releasing them. She takes notice of her heart rate and engages in breathing exercises on a daily basis. These strategies help her to remain calm.

As she observes Tyler, Andrea asks herself questions about the possible causes of his behaviors. She watches to see the specific times of day that he climbs on the cubbies, the behaviors he exhibits during transition routines, and what occurs before he seeks the undivided attention of an adult.

Early learning spaces can often include moments of heightened emotions, reactions, and behaviors that can be challenging for children and adults. As a part of applying a sensory processing lens, educators can benefit from gaining awareness about their own sensory patterns and implementing effective strategies for self-regulation (Dunn 2007). Recognizing that they also have thresholds of tolerance and needs for certain sensory stimuli can help them assume an empathetic stance toward children and can ensure they are able to maintain a calm, regulated state when a child requires coregulation support.

In her professional development, Andrea has learned about the importance of educators' own regulation along with a solid understanding of child development. As she got to know Tyler, she knew she needed to acknowledge and manage her own internal responses in order to respond to his sensory preferences in developmentally meaningful ways. By doing so, she was able to engage in observation and inquiry and to pinpoint the moments leading up to Tyler's sensory seeking behaviors.

To help support their own self-regulation, educators can consider engaging in both internal regulatory practices and external regulatory practices, such as

› **Internal regulatory practices:** Engaging in a body scan and noticing where tension is being held; releasing tension, for example, in the jaw or shoulders; monitoring heart rate
› **External regulatory practices:** Creating opportunities to process experiences with colleagues individually or in groups; incorporating practices to spur reflection and discussing with others; sharing about effective practices as well as those that could be improved

Create Opportunities for Various Kinds of Body Movement

Andrea and Tyler's program embeds extended opportunities for gross motor play that occurs outdoors and during all seasons. In addition, Andrea recognizes Tyler's need for big body movement and risky play (climbing trees,

jumping from higher heights) at other times of the day. She is also mindful of addressing this need with safety in mind for both him and the other children. She places handprints on the wall that he can reach by stretching his body or jumping. She and the other teachers in the class also institute a routine that allows Tyler and the other children to move out of their seats for a break.

Many of the behaviors that Tyler exhibited in the opening vignette indicated a high tolerance for tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive inputs. His continuous engagement in activities that involved gross motor movements, such as climbing, swinging, and sliding, suggested that his body required higher levels of physical input. When he obtained the necessary physical stimuli, he was able to remain alert and pay attention.

By embedding opportunities for physical play throughout the day, educators can be responsive to children's energetic and sensory needs. Play sessions that involve big body movements are important for children who require extra input through their proprioceptive and vestibular systems, so it is best to avoid taking away these opportunities as a consequence for certain behaviors. The following are ideas that educators can consider as they create experiences for children to engage in various kinds of movement:

> Allow children to safely lift or push heavier objects, such as carrying a basket of books to the reading area. This helps to channel physical movement into a helpful task and reinforces the idea that the child plays an important role as a member of the learning community.

> Plan for games, like Red Light, Green Light, that can provide children with opportunities to start and stop their bodies. Create obstacle courses that require children to engage in multiple physical tasks and can increase their understanding of how their body moves, such as a balance challenge.

> Provide seating options for contained movement, such as ball chairs or wiggle stools, which can meet a child's need for physical feedback while they remain in one place.

> Offer quiet options for children to manage their need for small, repetitive movements by placing yoga bands around chair legs that children can

bounce their feet off of and affixing hook-and-loop fasteners on the bottom of tables or the sides of cubbies to scratch or rub for tactile input.

In addition, it is important to include activities and resources that support children's developing awareness of where their bodies are in space. Teachers can offer helpful and supportive reminders to children about being aware of their bodies. They can also incorporate conversations about body awareness that include opportunities for children to share about their individual needs for space in the learning setting. For example, teachers could invite children to share what it feels like to be "squished on the rug." Then the children could use carpet dots to show the distance at which they feel most comfortable in relation to their neighbors. Activities like this can allow children to develop awareness of their individual needs and of the needs that their peers have.

Scaffold with Sensory Supports

Educators can adapt existing play materials and create visual aids to support children's awareness of their sensory processing patterns and needs and to provide more individualized sensory supports. Play allows children to use multiple sensory systems in concert, and it creates a variety of entry points for all learners to build sensory connections and organize their sensory experiences (NAEYC 2019, 2020). By integrating sensory supports into children's play, educators can help them as they learn about their own sensory preferences, recognize the preferences of others, and practice language to describe their internal experiences (Lewington et al. 2023).

We have also found that visual aids can assist children as they navigate sensory experiences. For example, holding a photo of a family member could help a child self-regulate if they have difficulty separating at the beginning of the day. Educators should select materials that align with a child's regulatory preferences based on their daily observations. For some children, an image of a family member could trigger a heightened emotional response instead of creating calm.

The following are examples of ways educators can use materials in their settings to support young children's sensory patterns, experiences, and awareness:

> Introduce a variety of materials that children can explore safely, and use rich language to describe the characteristics of the objects or materials.

> Play engaging games that isolate sensory systems or elevate the ways children's senses work together. For example, listening to a sound in isolation, like an airplane, may be challenging for children to identify, but when paired with a photo, children can more easily identify the sound and its source.

> Offer children mirrors, so they can practice making facial expressions that represent various emotional states. While doing so, encourage them to notice what they see, and talk with them about their observations.

> Share children's books that can help children identify and express their internal experiences. Point out situations and experiences in stories related to the feelings, needs, and urges that may be familiar to children. (For example, a character who experiences difficult interactions with other characters might come to understand that they were hungry and needed a snack.)

> Provide children with schedules and visual aids to help them plan ways to respond to internal needs that may arise throughout the day. For example, a first-then chart could include pictures of the learning setting (an image of a cubby where children place personal belongings next to an image of a sink for hand washing, and so on) to help guide children as they transition into the room in the morning.

Intentionally Leverage Environmental Inputs

High-quality early learning settings reflect a developmentally appropriate approach, where interactions, environments, and experiences are intentionally designed to ensure that all children are welcome (NAEYC 2019; Nager & Shapiro 2000). When learning settings are accessible and predictable, they can be supportive of children's learning experiences. We have found that environmental inputs, such as lighting, noise levels, materials, the design of a room, and the position of various objects (rugs, chairs, tables), can affect children's developing sensory systems. By looking at their learning settings through a sensory processing lens, educators can make intentional choices to create spaces that will help children remain alert and support their self-regulation.

In considering the range of sensory preferences that exist in an early childhood space, a responsive environment includes adaptations that support both sensory seeking and sensory avoidant behavior (Kong & Moreno 2018). For example, educators can modify the noise level to help children maintain regulation and focus by using white noise machines or calming music to provide auditory stimuli. Educators can also use their walls to support children's sensory experiences through the intentional use of color and by spacing out pictures and other images on the walls.

Exchange Effective Strategies with Families

Andrea realizes that Tyler's body needs more time to calm down. She reaches out to his family to learn about his process for reaching a calm state at home. The family shares that his grandmother cares for him overnight, and she wraps him in a heavy-knitted blanket as a part of this nighttime routine. Andrea decides to add a similar element to her approach with Tyler during nap time. She creates an extended nap routine for him: She holds Tyler in a comfortable and firm embrace with a heavy blanket while moving back and forth in a rocking chair. This does the trick! Andrea tells Tyler's family about the effectiveness of extending his nap time routine and allowing him the time to calm his body in preparation for sleep. They decide to add movement in addition to holding him and wrapping him in a blanket at bedtime.

Implementing consistent strategies across settings can serve as a starting point for practicing adaptations to support a child's sensory needs in their educational and home environments. For adaptations to be successful, they should be closely aligned with the child's sensory processing patterns. While it might require multiple attempts to identify the strategies that work, the critical factor is the educator's persistent desire to uncover a child's sensory needs (Noddings 2017). One way educators can do this is by learning about the materials and practices from a child's home context that can be integrated into the early learning space. As the above vignette illustrates, communication with families can lead to new or adjusted strategies and materials—in this case, a blanket, an embrace, and a

rocking movement—that can be used in both contexts. Educators are positioned to share successful strategies with families and to discuss the developmental progress they have observed in the classroom. "Families can implement these strategies as part of their family routines," contributing to a reciprocal partnership (Dunn 2007, 90). After Andrea shared what worked during nap time, Tyler's family replicated elements of this routine at home.

Conclusion

If Andrea's practices focused only on correcting Tyler's behaviors instead of addressing his underlying sensory needs, he would not have been able to fully engage in learning experiences. By noticing his specific, repeated behaviors, Andrea gained insight into the individualized strategies and supports that would address his sensory processing patterns. In addition, Tyler was able to release energy through his preferred methods and physical movements and by engaging in stimulating and safe activities that aligned with his strengths and interests. By honoring the unique sensory needs of each child, educators can help them learn about themselves, their preferences, and the power of embracing who they are.

The following are questions educators can consider as they reflect on ways to integrate a sensory processing lens into their own practices and settings:

› How do the ideas presented in this article affirm or challenge your existing beliefs about young children's sensory processing patterns and experiences?

› How would the sensory processing lens align or conflict with your program's current policies and practices?

› Which colleagues and/or leaders in your program could you collaborate with to explore how to implement a sensory processing lens in your program or setting?

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Creating a Community of Care, Learning, and Joy

Equitable, Inclusive, and Responsive Guidance

Tonia R. Durden

> Four-year-old Alex is playing in the block center creating a train track. Hailey is playing nearby and takes one of Alex's blocks. Alex screams, snatches the block back, and hits Hailey. She runs to the teacher, Ms. Kim, and cries, "Alex hit me. He's a mean boy!" Ms. Kim responds, "Alex no hitting. Please use your words."

How often in early childhood settings do we experience children using hitting, biting, or harmful words to communicate or express themselves? How often do we have immediate reactions and responses like Ms. Kim?

As we reflect on this issue's topic of what it means to transform our understanding of and approaches to children's behaviors, let's consider ways in which we are fostering an environment that supports young children's social and emotional health and development. For over 20 years, one of my areas of interest, teaching, and research has been ways to create environments that are socially, emotionally, and culturally responsive to young children. Too often, we react to the child rather than *reflect in action;* that is, pause and think in that moment about what the behavior is communicating. Take, for example, the opening scenario. What is Alex's *behavior* communicating to us? Is it communicating his frustration with being interrupted by a peer while engaging in a task? Is it communicating the need for intentional teaching on the vocabulary to use when expressing his feelings? Is his behavior also communicating the need to teach Hailey social engagement and

emotional literacy skills? Lastly, is his behavior communicating his need to feel included, valued, and respected?

In my previous columns, I encouraged us to reflect on three questions: "Who are you?"; "Why are you here?"; and "Are you ready?" These questions were appropriate as, in June 2024, we began our journey together with me as your NAEYC Governing Board president. We have entered a new year with new opportunities and challenges that face us in early childhood education. Therefore, I ask us to take a moment and consider a new essential question: "How are we reimagining our teaching, engagement, and experiences with young children?"

Close your eyes and visualize your last conversation with or about a young child.

When I take a moment to reflect, I recall a conversation with the after-school preschool teachers of my 4-year-old, Isaiah. When I picked him up, the teachers expressed concern that he would not come back into the building after outside play. Only after they sought the assistance of his primary teacher, Ms. Alice, would he return to the classroom. As a result, Isaiah didn't receive the special treat the teachers had brought to share.

Upon hearing this, I had two responses. My first was a mother response.

Tonia: (*kneeling down, facing Isaiah*) Did you not come inside when you were asked by your teachers?

(*Isaiah nods.*)

Tonia: Tell me why.

Isaiah: (*with a whine and frown*) I was playing and having fun with my friends. I didn't want to come inside.

Tonia: Your teachers' job is to keep you safe and allow other children to go outside and play too. Was it a safe decision to remain on the playground by yourself? Did you turn on your listening ears?

(Isaiah shakes his head no.)

Tonia: Next time, be sure to tell your teachers how you feel because there could be indoor play opportunities for you.

I wanted to center Isaiah's experience and listen to his why. I also wanted to create a teachable moment about safety and the role of his teachers and to acknowledge his feelings.

My second response was my early childhood teacher response. I said to the teachers, "Isaiah really enjoys outside play, and it appears he was not quite ready to come on the inside. Tell me a little about your routine in transitioning children back on the inside?"

With them, I was trying to shift away from the child and back to what the behavior was communicating and how we can guide young children's behavior in an inclusive and responsive manner. I later followed up with the center director to offer my professional supports for the teachers focused on responses to and consequences for children's behavior, building positive relationships with children, strategies for creating responsive routines and environments, and teaching and enhancing children's social and emotional development. But the work doesn't end there: I will be providing supports related to culturally responsive and racially equitable teaching.

We bring with us multiple identities and ways in which we view and experience the world. This particular scenario highly activated my identities as a Black mother, early childhood educator, and racial equity scholar. As a Black mother and early childhood educator, I have observed Black and Brown children negatively labeled, shunned, and punished for exhibiting the same behaviors as their White peers. As a racial equity scholar, I'm all too aware of the well-documented research and scholarship on how Black children are disproportionately impacted by preschool suspensions, expulsion, and early tracking into special education. Therefore, professional training should ensure that early childhood professionals are equipped with the skills and knowledge to provide a responsive, equitable, and safe environment for Black and Brown children that supports their social and emotional development and well-being.

Part of being culturally responsive and racially equitable is constant reflection on how we engage (or not) with each child in our settings when we are triggered by certain behaviors. What are your triggers when children exhibit certain behaviors? In turn, how might your response to a child *differ* based on gender, race, body size, personality, and home language? It is when we do not take time to critically self-reflect on our own biases and responses to children that we engage in inequitable discipline practices and approaches. Therefore, it's important to critically self-reflect: This is the initial step toward racially equitable engagement with children.

From that place, we can reimagine an equitable early learning environment in which we

› Explore, engage, and teach *with* children, not to children and at children

› Cocreate a community of care, learning, and joy where all participants (adults, children, families, classroom pets) feel a sense of belonging

› Establish collectively how we will safely, responsibly engage with one another

› Intentionally teach and model social and emotional skills

› Offer children the freedom to be creative, curious, collaborative, and their authentic selves

› Promote social and emotional well-being, positivity, enthusiasm, and an overall sense of motivation and engagement

Please join me this season in reimagining and transforming how we engage with children and support their social and emotional development. Join me as we collectively create for children and ourselves a community of care, learning, and joy!

Cómo crear una comunidad de cuidado, aprendizaje y disfrute

Orientar desde la equidad, la inclusión y la receptividad

Tonia R. Durden

Alex, de cuatro años, juega en el centro de bloques intentando crear una vía de tren. Hailey juega cerca de él y toma uno de los bloques de Alex. Alex grita, le arrebata el bloque a Hailey le pega. Hailey va corriendo a la maestra, la Sra. Kim, y llorando le dice: "Alex me pegó. ¡Es muy malo!" La Sra. Kim responde: "Alex, sin golpear. Usa las palabras."

¿Con qué frecuencia vemos que los niños en los entornos educativos de la primera infancia pegan, muerden o usan palabras hirientes para comunicarse o expresarse? ¿Con qué frecuencia tenemos reacciones y respuestas inmediatas como la de la Sra. Kim?

Mientras reflexionamos sobre el tema de este número, acerca de lo que significa transformar nuestra comprensión de las conductas de los niños y cómo las abordamos, pensemos de qué manera estamos propiciando un entorno que favorezca la salud y el desarrollo socioemocional de los niños pequeños. Durante más de 20 años, una de las áreas de interés, enseñanza e investigación a las que me he dedicado son las maneras de crear entornos que respondan a las necesidades sociales, emocionales y culturales de los niños pequeños. Con demasiada frecuencia, reaccionamos a la conducta del niño en lugar de *reflexionar durante la acción*; es decir, hacer una pausa y pensar en ese momento sobre qué está comunicando la conducta. Observemos, por ejemplo, la situación del principio. ¿Qué nos está comunicando *la conducta* de Alex? ¿Está comunicando su frustración por haber sido interrumpido por una compañera mientras realizaba una actividad? ¿Está comunicando la necesidad de una enseñanza intencionada sobre el vocabulario que puede usar para expresar sus sentimientos? ¿Su conducta también comunica la necesidad de enseñarle a Hailey habilidades de interacción social y

competencia emocional? Por último, ¿la conducta de Alex comunica su necesidad de sentirse incluido, valorado y respetado?

En mis columnas anteriores, animaba a reflexionar sobre tres preguntas: "¿Quién eres?"; "¿Por qué estás aquí?"; y "¿Estás lista?." Estas preguntas eran adecuadas ya que, en junio de 2024, comenzábamos nuestro recorrido conmigo como presidenta de la junta directiva de NAEYC. Estamos a punto de comenzar un nuevo año con nuevas oportunidades y desafíos que enfrentamos en el ámbito de la educación de la primera infancia. Por lo tanto, pido que nos tomemos un momento para reflexionar sobre una nueva pregunta fundamental: "¿Cómo podemos repensar nuestra labor de enseñanza, compromiso y experiencias con los niños pequeños?"

Cierren los ojos y visualicen su última conversación con un niño pequeño o acerca de él o ella.

Cuando me tomo un momento para reflexionar, recuerdo una conversación con las maestras de preescolar de mi hijo Isaiah, de 4 años. Cuando fui a buscarlo, las maestras expresaron su preocupación porque Isaiah no había querido entrar en el aula después de jugar afuera. Solo después de pedirle ayuda a su maestra principal, la Sra. Alice, él accedió a entrar en el aula. Como resultado, Isaiah no había recibido la sorpresa que las maestras habían traído para compartir entre los niños.

Después de escuchar esto, tuve dos respuestas: La primera fue la respuesta de madre.

Tonia: (*arrodillada, de frente a Isaiah*) ¿No entraste en el aula cuando las maestras te lo indicaron?

(*Isaiah asiente con la cabeza.*)

Tonia: Cuéntame por qué.

Isaiah: (*con un gemido y el ceño fruncido*) Estaba jugando y divirtiéndome con mis amigos. No quería entrar.

Tonia: El trabajo de tus maestras es cuidarte y permitir que los demás niños también salgan a jugar. ¿Crees que era seguro quedarse solo en el patio de juegos? ¿Activaste tus oídos para escuchar?

(*Isaiah niega con la cabeza.*)

Tonia: La próxima vez, no dejes de decirles a tus maestras cómo te sientes porque quizás haya otros juegos para disfrutar dentro del aula.

Quería centrarme en qué le había pasado a Isaiah y escuchar sus razones. También quería crear un momento de aprendizaje sobre la seguridad y el papel de sus maestras, y reconocer sus sentimientos.

Mi segunda respuesta fue la de maestra de la primera infancia. Les dije a las maestras: "A Isaiah le gusta mucho jugar afuera, y parece que no estaba listo para entrar. Cuéntenme un poco de la rutina de transición que usan para que los niños vuelvan al aula."

Con las maestras, intenté sacar el foco del niño y centrarme en lo que estaba comunicando su conducta y en cómo podemos guiar la conducta de los niños pequeños de una manera inclusiva y receptiva. Luego me puse en contacto con la directora del centro para ofrecer mi apoyo profesional a las maestras, orientado a las respuestas y consecuencias de la conducta de los niños, el establecimiento de vínculos positivos con los niños, las estrategias para crear rutinas y entornos receptivos, y la enseñanza y enriquecimiento del desarrollo socioemocional de los niños. Pero el trabajo no termina allí: Ofreceré apoyos relacionados con la enseñanza culturalmente sensible y racialmente equitativa.

Traemos con nosotros múltiples identidades y maneras de ver y experimentar el mundo. Esta situación concreta activó enormemente mis identidades de madre de raza negra, educadora de la primera infancia e investigadora de la equidad racial. Como madre de raza negra y educadora de la primera infancia, he observado cómo los niños negros y morenos son etiquetados negativamente, rechazados y castigados por exhibir las mismas conductas que sus pares de raza blanca. Como investigadora de la equidad racial, conozco muy bien las investigaciones y trabajos académicos bien documentados sobre cómo los niños negros sufren desproporcionadamente las suspensiones y la expulsión en preescolar, y la derivación prematura a la educación especial. Por lo tanto, la capacitación profesional debe garantizar que los profesionales de la primera infancia cuenten con las competencias y conocimientos necesarios para

brindar un entorno receptivo, equitativo y seguro para los niños negros y morenos que propicie su desarrollo socioemocional y su bienestar.

Parte de ser culturalmente sensible y racialmente equitativo consiste en reflexionar de manera constante sobre cómo interactuamos (o no) con cada niño en nuestros entornos cuando nos provocan ciertas conductas. ¿Cuáles son sus desencadenantes cuando los niños exhiben determinadas conductas? A su vez, ¿cómo podría *diferir* su respuesta a un niño en función de su género, raza, tamaño corporal, personalidad y lengua de origen? Cuando no nos tomamos el tiempo necesario para reflexionar de manera crítica sobre nuestros propios prejuicios y respuestas a los niños, incurrimos en prácticas y criterios disciplinarios que no son equitativos. Por lo tanto, es importante hacer una autorreflexión crítica: este es el primer paso hacia una interacción racialmente equitativa con los niños.

Desde ese lugar, podemos repensar un entorno educativo equitativo de la primera infancia en el que

› Exploramos, interactuamos y enseñamos *con* los niños, no para ni hacia los niños

› Creamos, en conjunto, una comunidad de cuidado, aprendizaje y disfrute en la que todos los participantes (adultos, niños, familias, mascotas de la clase) sientan que pertenecen a ella

› Definimos de manera conjunta cómo nos relacionaremos entre nosotros de manera segura y responsable

› Enseñamos y demostramos intencionadamente habilidades sociales y emocionales

› Ofrecemos a los niños la libertad de ser creativos, curiosos, colaboradores y mostrar su yo auténtico

› Fomentamos el bienestar socioemocional, la positividad, el entusiasmo y una sensación general de motivación y participación

Acompáñenme esta temporada a repensar y transformar la manera en que nos relacionamos con los niños y propiciamos su desarrollo socioemocional. Acompáñenme en la creación colectiva de una comunidad de cuidado, aprendizaje y disfrute para los niños y para nosotros mismos.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Transforming Our Understanding of and Approaches to Children's Behaviors

Michelle Kang

This issue of *Young Children* holds a special place in my heart. My own understanding of and approach to my child's behavior was transformed by an early childhood educator. Things were hard when my eldest son was a baby, and we were exhausted and struggling. Yet when we most needed it, we found support and comfort from the high-quality, NAEYC-accredited early childhood education program whose director and educators became part of our family. While my son learned from them every day, so did I.

Maureen showed me how my son's love for picking up Cheerios developed his fine motor skills. Hala and Patti's notes about his art projects and sensory experiences gave me insight into what captivated his curiosities. And Jen, who showed us where we could find the delight in learning through all types of play, was also the first person to help us see that our son might be a different type of learner. This eventually helped us to understand his gifts as someone who lives on the autism spectrum. The truth is that the partnerships we had with these early childhood educators not only transformed our understanding and approaches with our child, it changed the trajectory of our lives.

Transforming Understanding

Reflecting back on that time and contemplating the enormous challenges facing our children, families, educators, and communities today got me thinking about what it takes to "transform our understanding." How often are we able to shift our own perspectives—let alone someone else's? I've found that it happens most when we are able to start with trust, listen with openness, and actively seek out diverse voices and opinions. It requires confronting our own biases and recognizing that there might be a problem or a gap with our current understanding and approaches. This is not easy.

Yet I see it happen almost every day at NAEYC, whether it's our customer care team skillfully working through a problem with a member or our policy team gathering a wide diversity of educator stories and data that inform—and transform—our policy agenda and priorities. Our organizational commitment to centering a diversity of educator voices and expertise leads to new and deeper understandings all the time. Sometimes our listening reinforces what we thought we knew—and sometimes it takes us in directions we didn't anticipate, identifies consequences we didn't envision, and helps us find solutions we hadn't thought of.

This kind of practice is infused throughout this issue of *Young Children*, which explores the many ways in which the authors listened to educators, to families, and to children and used that listening to build trust, ultimately helping other educators to increase their understanding of what is behind a child's challenging behavior.

Translating Understanding into Action

The question then becomes: What do we do with this transformed understanding? What new openness do we have to change? Again, I think back to my own transformation and the ways in which my increased understanding allowed me to adapt my approaches and interactions with my son. I see how Maureen, Patti, Hala, and Jen guided me in moving from understanding to action and gave me the tools I needed to work with.

I see this same process outlined in so many of the articles in this issue—examples of how educators expanded their understanding and adapted their work to put equitable, joyful approaches into practice in the context of their own unique settings. For example, in one of the articles, we see how increased understanding leads educators to consider new teaching practices that strengthen the social and emotional environments of their settings.

This is precisely what NAEYC is offering its readers and members—not only information about "the what," but also numerous examples about and support for "the how." This is the core of using information, stories, and narrative to transform understanding and then translating that understanding into action.

It's also what NAEYC is undertaking inside our own organization as well. From early learning program accreditation to membership, we are acknowledging the problems, engaging in listening and collaboration, then transforming our understanding and approaches in ways that we believe will culminate in positive and empowering change. Your voices are fueling our path to ongoing improvements within our association, but that doesn't mean the path will be easy or smooth. As with any transformation, the process is complex and messy, and it only ultimately works when rooted in the kind of listening and trust building in which we are deeply engaged—and in which we hope you will continue or start to participate in with us.

Standing Up for Educators as They Support Every Child and Family

It is due, in part, to the kind of listening and trust building that I experienced with my son's early childhood educators that I was able to drop my sweet, special, firstborn child off at college last year. I remain more grateful than I can say to his first teachers for the knowledge, caring, and skills with which they transformed our family's understanding and approaches toward our son.

But I will say this: Every family—including those with a disability in their family—deserves the kind of loving, skilled, and competent early childhood education that we were so fortunate to receive. It is so hard to do this work well, and as educators face ever more challenges and challenging behaviors, it is ever more important for us to stand up and support them in supporting every child and family, both in their own programs and as advocates.

I hope the educators reading this issue will find guidance that helps you transform your understanding and your approaches, and I thank all of you for the work you do every day to transform the understanding of others—about who you are, what you do, and how vital your work is in helping children, families, and our entire nation thrive.

This is precisely what NAEYC is offering its readers and members—not only information about "the what," but also numerous examples about and support for "the how." This is the core of using information and stories to transform understanding and then translating that understanding into action.

HACER CONEXIONES

Cómo transformar nuestra comprensión y abordaje de las conductas infantiles

Michelle Kang

Este número de *Young Children* ocupa un lugar especial en mi corazón. Yo experimenté la transformación de mi propia comprensión y abordaje de la conducta de mi hijo gracias a una educadora de la primera infancia. Cuando mi hijo mayor era bebé, las cosas no eran fáciles, y nosotros estábamos agotados y angustiados. Sin embargo, cuando más lo necesitamos, encontramos apoyo y consuelo en el programa de educación de la primera infancia, un programa de calidad y acreditado por la NAEYC, cuyo directora y educadoras se convirtieron en parte de nuestra familia. Mi hijo aprendía de ellos cada día, y yo también.

Maureen me enseñó cómo el gusto de mi hijo por recoger Cheerios desarrolló su motricidad fina. Gracias a las notas de Hala y Patti sobre sus proyectos artísticos y experiencias sensoriales, comprendí qué cosas despertaban su curiosidad. Y Jen, que nos mostró dónde podíamos encontrar el placer de aprender mediante todo tipo de juegos, fue además la primera persona que nos ayudó a ver que nuestro hijo podría ser un tipo de estudiante diferente. Con el tiempo, esto nos llevó a comprender que sus capacidades eran las de una persona que se encuentra en el espectro autista. La verdad es que las colaboraciones que establecimos con estas educadoras de la primera infancia no solo transformó nuestra manera de entender e interactuar con nuestro hijo, sino que cambió el rumbo de nuestras vidas.

Cómo transformar nuestra comprensión

Reflexionar sobre aquella época y contemplar los enormes desafíos que enfrentan hoy nuestros niños, familias, educadores y comunidades me hizo pensar en lo que se necesita para "transformar nuestra comprensión". ¿Con qué frecuencia somos capaces de cambiar nuestra propia perspectiva, por no mencionar la de los demás? Me he dado cuenta de que esto ocurre, sobre todo, cuando somos capaces de abordar algo con confianza,

escuchar con sinceridad y buscar activamente voces y opiniones diversas. Es algo que nos exige enfrentar nuestros propios prejuicios y reconocer que puede haber un problema o un vacío en nuestra comprensión y abordajes actuales. Esto no es algo sencillo.

Y, sin embargo, lo veo prácticamente a diario en NAEYC, cuando nuestro equipo de atención al cliente resuelve con destreza un problema de un afiliado o cuando nuestro equipo de políticas recopila historias y datos de una amplia diversidad de educadores que sirven de base—y transforman—nuestro programa de políticas y nuestras prioridades. Nuestro compromiso, como organización, de centrar la atención en la diversidad de voces y conocimientos de los educadores genera una comprensión nueva y mucho más amplia. A veces nuestra escucha refuerza lo que creíamos saber y, otras veces, nos lleva en direcciones que no habíamos previsto, identifica consecuencias que no habíamos imaginado y nos sirve para encontrar soluciones en las que no habíamos pensado.

Este tipo de práctica está presente en todo este número de *Young Children*, que analiza las diversas maneras en que los autores escucharon a los educadores, a las familias y a los niños y utilizaron esa escucha para generar confianza, lo que, en definitiva, sirvió para que otros educadores ampliaran su comprensión de qué es lo que se esconde detrás de la conducta problemática de un niño.

Cómo traducir la comprensión en acción

Esta es la cuestión: ¿Qué hacemos con esta nueva comprensión? ¿Qué nueva visión tenemos que cambiar? Una vez más, pienso en mi propia transformación y en cómo pude adaptar mis abordajes e interacciones con mi hijo cuando logré tener una mayor comprensión. Ahora veo cómo Maureen, Patti, Hala y Jen me guiaron para pasar de la comprensión a la acción y me dieron las herramientas que necesitaba para trabajar.

Veo este mismo proceso planteado en muchos de los artículos de este número, ejemplos de cómo los educadores ampliaron su comprensión y adaptaron su trabajo para abordar las actividades con equidad y disfrute en el contexto de sus propios

entornos. Por ejemplo, en uno de los artículos, vemos cómo una mayor comprensión hace que los educadores se planteen nuevas prácticas docentes que refuercen los aspectos sociales y emocionales de sus entornos.

Esto es precisamente lo que NAEYC ofrece a sus lectores y miembros: no solo información sobre "el qué", sino también numerosos ejemplos y recursos sobre "el cómo." Este es la clave de cómo usar la información, las historias y la narrativa para transformar la comprensión y luego traducir esa comprensión en acción.

Es también lo que NAEYC está llevando a cabo dentro de su propia organización. En temas que incluyen desde la acreditación de programas de educación de la primera infancia hasta la membresía, estamos reconociendo los problemas, escuchando y colaborando, para luego transformar nuestra comprensión y nuestras iniciativas de un modo que creemos que culminará en un cambio positivo y fortalecedor. Sus voces impulsan nuestro trabajo para lograr mejoras continuas dentro de nuestra asociación, pero eso no significa que el camino vaya a ser sencillo o sin escollos. Como toda transformación, el proceso es complejo y desordenado y, en definitiva, solo funciona cuando se aborda con el tipo de escucha y creación de confianza con el que estamos completamente comprometidos; y esperamos que ustedes puedan seguir o empezar a participar en este esfuerzo.

Cómo defender a los educadores en su labor de apoyo a los niños y sus familias

Gracias, en parte, al tipo de escucha y creación de confianza que experimenté con las educadoras de la primera infancia de mi hijo, el año pasado pude acompañar a mi tierno y especial hijo mayor en su comienzo de la universidad. Sigo más que agradecida con sus primeras maestras por los conocimientos, la atención y las habilidades que transformaron la comprensión y el abordaje de nuestra familia hacia nuestro hijo.

Solo diré lo siguiente: Todas las familias—incluso quienes tienen una discapacidad en la familia—merecen el tipo de educación de la primera infancia cariñosa, calificada y competente que nosotros tuvimos la suerte de recibir. Es

muy difícil hacer bien este trabajo, y en tanto los educadores enfrentan cada vez más desafíos y conductas problemáticas, es sumamente importante que los defendamos y los respaldemos en su labor de apoyo a cada niño y familia, tanto en sus propios programas como en su función de defensores.

Espero que los educadores que lean este número encuentren una guía que los ayude a transformar su comprensión y sus abordajes; y deseo agradecer a todos ustedes por el trabajo que hacen a diario para transformar la comprensión de los demás: sobre quiénes son ustedes, lo que hacen y lo esencial que es su trabajo para ayudar a los niños, a las familias y a toda nuestra nación a progresar.

> Esto es precisamente lo que NAEYC ofrece a sus lectores y miembros: no solo información sobre "el qué", sino también numerosos ejemplos y recursos sobre "el cómo." Este es la clave de cómo usar la información, las historias y la narrativa para transformar la comprensión y luego traducir esa comprensión en acción.

Member Spotlight

Michelle Zurita-Sharpe

Prekindergarten Special
Education Teacher
Blair Early Childhood Center
Chicago, Illinois

One of NAEYC's tenets is to lift up the voices of early childhood educators and empower them to share their voices with others. Through her years as a NAEYC and Illinois AEYC member, Michelle Zurita-Sharpe has spoken out for the field in myriad ways: As a mentor to preservice teachers, as a member of ILAEYC's policy committee, and as the Illinois State Board of Education's 2024 Early Childhood Teacher of the Year. As she looks toward future advocacy efforts to elevate issues such as equity and compensation, she remains firmly rooted in her work with prekindergartners in Chicago. We wish Michelle well as she continues to exemplify the dedication and excellence of the early childhood education field.

Michelle Kang, Chief Executive Officer

As the youngest of five children, Michelle Zurita-Sharpe always wanted a younger sibling and found herself gravitating toward young children. "I love their enthusiasm and their energy," she says. As the child of a Deaf mother, she was also attuned to different abilities. Those factors—coupled with a program in middle school where she read to elementary-age children and a high school job volunteering at a public library—prompted Michelle to pursue a degree in education; specifically, with young children.

Today, Michelle is a special education teacher in a blended pre-K classroom at Blair Early Childhood Center, a Chicago public school. Blair serves children in prekindergarten through second grade. Almost 80 percent of the center's population includes students with developmental delays and/or disabilities.

Besides her teaching, Michelle serves on the public policy committee of the Illinois Association for the Education of Young Children (ILAEYC). In 2024, the Illinois State Board of Education named her Early Childhood Teacher of the Year. Following are excerpts from a recent conversation.

You're a classroom teacher, policy advocate, and past mentor of teacher candidates. What issues from the field resonate with you?

Definitely the teacher shortage and educators' low compensation. Teachers in the United States work more than teachers in other countries, yet we are paid less and experience greater stress when compared to other working adults. That combination of low pay-high stress is a big issue we're facing. There's also a significant pay disparity between educators in home- and center-based programs and in elementary schools. That contributes to our fragmented system. We can't do right by children until we have some unified efforts around equitable compensation.

I'm very privileged to be teaching in Illinois because our current governor, J.B. Pritzker, cares about early childhood education and care. His Smart Start Illinois initiative is a multiyear plan to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into our state's home visiting, early intervention, child care, and preschool programs. The plan's goals include efforts to minimize child care deserts and to support quality improvements, such as raising the salaries and wages of early childhood staff. I'm hoping all the goals come to fruition.

Share a little about your classroom teaching: What are your joys and challenges at Blair?

I teach two half-day classes. I coteach with a general education teacher and two paraprofessionals. My favorite part of the day is in the morning, when the children come through the doors. I love getting down on their level, making eye contact, and greeting them by name and with enthusiasm. We have breakfast, morning circle time, outdoor time, centers, small groups, story time, and on some days,

specials like music class and yoga class. Both guided and self-directed play experiences are an important part of our learning.

I get to work 30 minutes or more before my contractual hours begin, so I can prepare. Adequate preparation time is essential for early childhood educators. That's because individualization is the application of equity: What does each child need to be actively engaged? How can educators identify and draw on every child's strengths? Teachers need time to think about their lessons and prepare hands-on materials. We also need time to create visuals, which are a universal support for children with disabilities and for multilingual learners. We need time to create, print, cut, and laminate visuals. We need time to pull out manipulatives, to count them, to figure out how many we're going to use, and to sanitize them after use. I have the privilege of working with three other professionals. To be one teacher and have to do all that—and do it well—is unrealistic. We need to prioritize policies that lower class sizes and increase educators' preparation time.

How has NAEYC supported you in your work?

I learned about NAEYC through my teacher preparation program, and I joined ILAEYC at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was through NAEYC's 2021 Public Policy Forum that I first learned about how to be an informed and effective advocate for young children. I began and have continued to meet with my elected officials to share my experiences, discuss issues, and troubleshoot solutions related to early childhood and the teaching profession.

The Illinois School Board of Education named you Early Childhood Teacher of the Year in 2024. What project were you recognized for?

As a first-year teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, I led professional development for the teachers at my school to help them set up their Google Classroom sites and to use interactive tools for virtual instruction. I also wrote a social story about remote learning and created three different DonorsChoose projects to help pay for materials I used to strengthen families' abilities to engage in hands-on activities with their children at home. [DonorsChoose is a US-based nonprofit that allows individuals to donate directly to public school classroom projects.] Outside of the classroom, I was recognized for my work on equitable funding and the importance of representing Illinois teachers' voices in the state's early childhood decision making.

In my application, I also offered an example of how I used puppets to help children understand inclusivity. I had two puppets who were in a music class and having different reactions. Puppet A was jumping and having a good time. Puppet B was holding its ears. I asked the children, "What can be done if Puppet A feels this way, and Puppet B feels this way?" The children were really good at generating ideas. We offered Puppet B noise-canceling headphones.

You've said that you're near the end of your five-year plan. What's next for you?

I've become passionate about educating our next generation of teachers. I'm recently certified in foundations of college teaching and am seeking adjunct faculty

positions. As a Teacher of the Year, I have opportunities to be part of advisory groups to the state board of education. I hope to continue engaging in policy and advocacy. But I want to do these things as I continue to teach full time. I have no plans to leave the classroom. I'm still in love with it!

NAEYC.org/get-involved/ membership/spotlight/ nominate

SHARE YOUR STORY Answer a few questions to tell us about your work with young children and what NAEYC membership means to you.

NOMINATE A MEMBER Share why a NAEYC member you know should be recognized for their work with young children.

Racelighting Black Children in Early Learning Settings

Idara Essien-Wood, J. Luke Wood, Frank Harris III, and Tina M. King

The term *gaslighting* originated from the 1938 play *Gas Light*, by Patrick Hamilton. In the play, Hamilton depicts a spouse intentionally engaging in efforts to make his partner question her own perspectives, memories, and judgment. When individuals experience gaslighting, they can begin to doubt their understanding of reality due to psychological manipulation (Stern 2018). Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color may "second guess their own lived experiences [and realities] with racism" due to their consistent exposure to systemically delivered racialized messages (Wood & Harris III 2021a, 11). We (the authors) refer to this phenomenon as *racelighting*. When young children undergo racelighting by educators and other adults in their learning environments, they can also begin to second guess themselves and to feel disoriented (Wood & Harris 2024).

We have learned, as parents of Black children and as researchers, that Black students at all levels of education, including young learners, experience racelighting. From 2018 through 2023, we elicited nearly 1,500 narratives from the parents and guardians of Black children. In one of the narratives, a parent noted that their child's educator, who had transitioned to their child's class in the middle of the year, consistently raised her voice and reprimanded the Black children for perceived misbehaviors. In addition, she moved all six of the Black children to the back of the class within two weeks of taking over the class, and she recommended that the Black students be tested for behavior and learning disabilities.

This account mirrors findings that show that Black children are more likely than their non-Black peers to be referred for special education services for emotional and behavioral reasons (e.g., Hines, Boveda, & Lindo 2021). In addition, there is evidence that educators disproportionately reprimand Black children for age-appropriate behaviors, such as turning around in their seats, fidgeting at their desks, or dropping items on the floor (Wood et al. 2020). When educators misinterpret Black children's behavior as hyperactive, defiant, or in need of control, Black children can begin to question their intelligence and their place within the learning setting (Harper & Wood 2023).

Racelighting is a complex theory that cuts across various disciplines (Wood & Harris III 2021b). In addition to Black people, racelighting impacts groups of Indigenous people and people of color, who have their own experiences of historical marginalization within the United States. For the purpose of this article, we focus on the ways social and historical anti-Black racism continues to impact young Black children in early childhood education settings through racial biases and racial microaggressions. We discuss the specific harms of racelighting and the types of racelighting messages young Black children receive in early learning settings. Through the story of 6-year-old Jacob and his family, we provide an account drawn from the experiences of the Black families who participated in our research study. Finally, we share guidance for early childhood educators to consider as they examine how racelighting may exist in their own settings and as they work to be responsive and affirming practitioners for the young Black children they teach.

An Overview of Racelighting

The initial causes of racelighting are historical, social, and cultural antecedents that have contributed to present-day racial biases and racial microaggressions (see Wood & Harris III 2021b). Here, we focus on the antecedents that have specifically contributed to *anti-Black racism*, which can be described as antagonistic views of Black people and Black culture that manifest in laws, policies, language, media,

and customs in ways that are uniquely disparaging (Dumas & ross 2016). (For an overview of the historical antecedents that have contributed to anti-Blackness, see "The Big Picture: Race, Racism, and Racialized Identity" on this page.) The racelighting process involves the manifestation of racial biases and racial microaggressions that result in experiences of stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, and racial battle fatigue. We discuss each of these components in more detail in this section.

Racial Biases and Racial Microaggressions

Racial bias, whether explicit or implicit, impacts Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Individuals who hold implicit biases are generally unaware of the involuntary attributions and associations they have about groups of people. In contrast, individuals who hold explicit biases are conscious of their beliefs. Whether implicit or explicit, racial biases are communicated through prejudicial actions (Bell et al. 2023).

Commonly, racial biases are realized through the rendering of racial microaggressions, which are verbal and nonverbal insults and invalidations, often communicated subtly and with ambiguity (Sue et al. 2007; Wood & Harris III 2021b). While it is common for racial microaggressions to occur because of implicit racial biases, it is important to note that they can also be driven by explicit biases (Sue et al. 2007). They operate as seemingly innocuous manifestations of racism in the lives and daily experiences of Black people (Pierce 1970). For example, while on the surface, being called *articulate* might seem like a compliment, when told to a Black person, it has an underlying meaning: It often communicates the assumption that the Black person has outperformed the speaker's low expectations (formed from pervasive race-based stereotypes) and communicates underlying

The Big Picture: Race, Racism, and Racialized Identity

The concept of race comes from a history of justifying European colonization of countries made up of dark-skinned people (Barndt 1991; Kendi 2016). The colonizers created a hierarchy of humans in which some people were considered genetically superior and destined to rule while others were viewed as genetically inferior and incapable of self-determination. European settlers brought this idea of race to what is now the Americas. They used it as a way to normalize and justify the enslavement of Africans and to steal Indigenous people's lands and displace them onto reservations on inferior lands. The European definition of race made it possible for colonizers to think of certain groups of people as disposable and exploitable (Kendi 2016; Feagin 2000).

As part of setting up a system of slavery and racism in the United States, it was necessary to legally define racialized identities to make clear who could be "owned" by other human beings and who had the right to do the owning (Hannaford 1996; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, with Edwards 2011; Kendi 2016). Skin color was made the primary marker that defined these racial identities, so white and black became central to the way people were categorized. And, just as distinctly different African peoples, with different languages, customs, and beliefs, were combined into one group called *Black,* so were Europeans of different languages, customs, and beliefs combined into one group called *White*.

The ending of slavery did not end the power of the constructs of race and racialized identities. Rather, a system of legalized racism continued that ensured economic, political, educational, and cultural advantages to Whites as a group. Segregation, denial of voting rights, lack of economic and educational access, and the resulting inability to amass generational wealth all worked to keep White people in power. This system used misinformation, stereotyping, prejudices, biases, and violence toward people seen as "not White" in order to justify the inequality racism created (Roediger 2005; Rothstein 2017; Wallis 2017; Gates 2019).

From *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd ed., by Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins (2020).

doubts about the Black person's intelligence (Sue 2010). Because of this, the recipient of the microaggression experiences psychological harm resulting from the challenge to interpret the subtext of the message. Given the difficulty in interpreting microaggressions, we posit that young Black children may believe the harmful messages that racial microaggressions convey, especially when enacted by educators and other significant adults in their lives, who inherently occupy a position of authority.

In early learning settings, young Black children can encounter racial biases and microaggressions, which can harm the way they understand their world and themselves. For example, Barbarin and Crawford (2006) share the narratives of educator-observers who were conducting a two-year study in pre-K settings across the United States. One observer noted that the teacher, Bridget, who was White, routinely expressed hostility toward the children in her class, all of whom were Black. She criticized the children and told them that they were bad. She also blamed them for her unhappiness, telling them that "they made her not want to be a teacher" (81). The researchers concluded that "the children were blamed for Bridget's unhappiness and in time may have come to accept as true her assertion that they were bad" (81).

Impacts of Racelighting on Black Children

Young Black children encounter harmful messages and experiences at a critical time when they are building fundamental knowledge and skills across developmental domains. A young child may not understand or be able to articulate how these racist views affect them, but they are aware that racial differences and racism exist (Sachdeva & Adair 2019). Research shows that Black children are routinely exposed to depictions that cast them as troublemakers, academically inferior, and less capable and valuable to their learning community than their peers (Wright & Ford 2016; Wright, with Counsell 2018).

Pervasive stereotypes that Black children experience daily in their environments impact them emotionally and psychologically (Wood & Harris III 2021c). For example, data we gathered from the parents of Black children indicated that their children engaged in negative self-talk, such as "I'm bad," "No one likes me," and "I don't have any friends." These

messages reinforced narratives and attitudes about the intelligence of Black children and aligned with stereotypical perceptions of Black children as learners (Essien & Wood 2024).

The following are three specific types of harm that can result from racelighting:

› *Stereotype threat* occurs when a learner monitors their speech and behavior in academic settings to avoid reifying negative stereotypes about their aptitude and intelligence (Steele 1997). Often, Black children are assumed to be academically inferior in comparison to their peers, so their engagement and performance can be stymied when they are concerned that they may reinforce notions of inferiority (Steele & Aronson 1995; Steele 1997). For example, if a young Black child became aware of stereotypes that communicated that Black children are less academically capable than White children, they might experience heightened anxiety about the need to perform well on a math assessment.

› *Imposter syndrome* describes the overwhelming sense of doubt a learner experiences about their abilities and their concern that others will deem them illegitimate or a fraud (Clance & Imes 1978). An example of a Black child experiencing imposter syndrome might look like a second grader who feels that they do not belong in the advanced or accelerated group they were assigned to. They may even have concerns that the other children in the group will also assume that they do not belong.

› *Racial battle fatigue* describes the cognitive, emotional, and physiological effects that accrue because of exposure to persistent race-related stress (Smith 2004). Racism can impact a person's ability to process and retain information and maintain attention and focus. Because of this, Black children may be negatively impacted, over time, within academic environments where these skills are important to their learning. In addition, when Black children experience racial battle fatigue, they may display anger, resentment, and lack of confidence, suppress angry emotions, otherwise withdraw emotionally and socially, and undergo physical symptoms (Essien & Wood 2024). Physiological symptoms can include difficulty sleeping, upset stomach, elevated heart rate, headaches, and jaw clenching while sleeping (Smith 2014).

Our Research and Jacob's Context

In 2018, we began collecting narratives from the parents and guardians of young Black children in preschool through third-grade settings to learn about the children's experiences. We elicited written responses from over 1,500 participants throughout the United States as a part of our critical race counterstorytelling research project. *Counterstorytelling* is a research method that prioritizes the data that can be drawn from the stories and experiences of people of color to understand social realities that often counter dominant narratives (Harper 2009). For example, the counterstory process can provide unique insights into the ways race and racism manifest in social settings, such as the manner in which racial microaggressions impact Black children and their families in early childhood settings (Essien 2019).

From the narrative responses we gathered, we created a composite narrative that represents the recurring themes and insights found in our data (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). It reflects the lived experiences of the participants in our study; it is grounded in the real places and situations described in participants' responses. Our narrative is about a kindergartner named Jacob, his peers and educator, and their setting and circumstances. We show what racelighting can look like by illustrating it through Jacob's story, and we share two necessary approaches for educators to take as they work to address racelighting in their own settings.

Jacob's Experience

Jacob is excited to enter kindergarten because he enjoyed preschool. The fact that several of his friends from preschool will also be in his kindergarten class heightens his anticipation. However, within weeks of school beginning, Jacob's demeanor begins to change. Ms. Saunders, Jacob's teacher, appears to single him out. She asks Jacob to read aloud, then criticizes him for every error. She tells the children to line up, then points out that Jacob is slightly out of line. One day, she yells at Jacob for tapping his pencil while she is talking. Jacob's peers make the same mistakes, but Ms. Saunders regularly makes comments about his errors in front of the other children.

One day during outside time, she observes a group of boys, including Jacob, throwing rocks at a fence. She reprimands Jacob, the only Black child in the group, and says nothing to the other children. Later, she informs Jacob's parents about the incident and characterizes him as a "troublemaker." She puts him in in-school suspension, where he spends a full day sitting outside of the principal's office.

Jacob becomes unusually irritable, disengaged, and withdrawn. Ms. Saunders regularly sends Jacob's parents notes regarding his behavior. With so many notes and messages from Ms. Saunders, Jacob's parents begin to doubt their effectiveness as parents. They start to second-guess their efforts in preparing him academically, and they begin to wonder whether Jacob might, indeed, be the "troublemaker" that Ms. Saunders describes.

As the school year progresses, mornings become increasingly difficult for Jacob. He doesn't get out of bed when he wakes up, so his parents have had to start coming into his room to ask him to get ready for school. Even after they do so, he often doesn't move. Instead, he tells them that he doesn't want to go to school because either his stomach or head hurts. They notice that this has become a pattern since Jacob's issues with Ms. Saunders began.

Ms. Saunders's treatment of Jacob illustrates what research indicates: Negative language tends to be used to describe young Black children in ways that assume they have bad intentions and, therefore, need to be more closely watched for disruptive behavior. Consequently, they are disproportionately singled out for discipline and corrective action (Noguera 2003; Gilliam et al. 2016; Allen 2017). Jacob is used as an example to his peers of what not to be, how not to act, and how not to learn. When Jacob and his peers threw rocks at the fence, Ms. Saunders only reprimanded

Jacob. For the other children in the group, nothing occurred. This differential treatment of Jacob in comparison to his peers is an indicator of racial bias.

Narrative data from our project showed that contexts and situations similar to Jacob's can result in Black children viewing themselves as "bad," not as "smart" as other children, and doubtful about whether they belong in school, indicating experiences of imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes 1978). Consistent with racial battle fatigue, participants shared examples of their children exhibiting physiological responses, such as headaches and stomach aches, in anticipation of having to engage in environments like Jacob's, where there was persistent racial stress (Smith 2014). Furthermore, we learned about the effects of racelighting on parents and guardians, who also experienced racial microaggressions. Participants shared about interactions with educators like the ones Jacob's parents' encountered with Ms. Saunders, which affected their perceptions of themselves as effective parents.

Ms. Saunders's Change in Approach

Ms. Adams is one of Ms. Saunders's colleagues. Her class has recess at the same time as Ms. Saunders's class. She notices that Ms. Saunders tends to single Jacob out. At first, she does not say anything because she does not want to interfere. However, she notices Jacob becoming increasingly isolated: He does not play with the other children, has begun to sit alone during recess, and his body language shows that he feels dejected. Even though Jacob isn't in her class, she feels compelled to share her observations. Ms. Adams approaches Ms. Saunders and shares her concerns about Ms. Saunders's differential treatment of Jacob. She also discusses the changes she has observed in him.

At first, Ms. Saunders is defensive. However, upon reflection, she realizes that she needs to be more thoughtful about how she engages with Jacob. She identifies ways to change her approach: Instead of using Jacob as an example of what not to do, she highlights his strengths, such as the fact that he likes drawing and writing short stories and poems. In fact, she finds that he has an inherent

knack for reading and writing. In addition, she spends more time supporting him, expressing authentic care, and being an advocate for him by leaving encouraging messages on his desk and celebrating him as a positive example in her classroom. While it takes months to see the impact of her more intentional and responsive approaches, by the end of the school year, Jacob feels welcome, safe, and validated in her setting.

Research on implicit bias indicates that negative messages have a greater tendency to be communicated when the speaker's time is constrained and when they experience stress (Bertrand et al. 2005). Educators who show signs of being overwhelmed are more likely to engage in racial biases and microaggressions that lead to the racelighting of Black children (Essien & Wood 2024).

While Ms. Saunders possessed a caring attitude toward the children, she serves as an example of an educator who did not initially understand how her actions could affect Black learners like Jacob. As reflected in her initial response to Ms. Adams, some educators may, in good conscience, defend their actions (Sue 2005). Educators who use disciplinary approaches similar to those illustrated in this story may believe they are acting in the best interest of Black children by providing necessary structure and preparation for future schooling. However, the nature of implicit bias means that even if educators do not recognize the potentially negative impacts that their interactions with children can have, they can still cause harm, as illustrated by Jacob's emotional, psychological, and physical experiences resulting from racelighting.

It was important for Ms. Saunders to recognize that she was not investing in Jacob's full potential as a learner or engaging him as a member of their learning community. By shifting her approach, Ms. Saunders began to acknowledge, celebrate, and support his strengths and interests. She was able to form a positive relationship with Jacob. These actions helped to counteract his negative self-perceptions and his growing anxiety about going to school. Next, we share more about the importance of intentional reflection and essential first steps educators can take.

Practicing Equitable Approaches with Awareness and Intentionality

The NAEYC position statement on advancing equity encourages educators to examine their own beliefs and biases and, even when unintended, take responsibility for biased actions (2019). It also calls early childhood professionals to hold one another accountable and to "speak out against unfair policies or practices and challenge biased perspectives" and "challenge and change policies, laws, systems, and institutional practices that keep social inequities in place" (8). Thus, school and program leaders and teacher colleagues should engage in feedback with one another when they see instances of racial biases and racial microaggressions. While educators may find these conversations to be difficult or uncomfortable, the effects of racelighting must be understood and addressed. The following are specific ways educators can counteract racelighting in their settings.

Evaluate Disciplinary Approaches

NAEYC's position statement on advancing equity suggests that educators be attentive to the role that implicit and explicit biases have in their interactions with young children and their interpretations of children's behaviors (2019). Educators are encouraged to reflect on whether they are viewing challenging behaviors, words, and nonverbal behaviors through a lens of bias. This is critical to ensure that children are provided with intentional and responsive guidance that supports their healthy social and emotional development. Educators can analyze their responses to behavior and their implementation of disciplinary responses by generating and examining data. This can include documenting information about children's racial backgrounds and recording instances when they apply disciplinary approaches—such as verbal reprimands, warnings, loss of recess or free time, referrals, or suspensions—to evaluate whether they disproportionately discipline children of certain racial groups.

Believe Black Children

Like their peers, Black children can be on the receiving end of aggressive behaviors from other children that include being pushed, bullied, ridiculed, and teased.

However, too often, when this occurs, Black children can experience *reverse causality*, where learners who raise concerns about their mistreatment are instead blamed (Wood 2019). An example from our work involved a young Black girl being teased and pushed to the ground by her peers. However, upon telling the teacher what occurred, the teacher responded by asking her what she did to make the children push her. Our research shows that the mistreatment of Black children can go unaddressed because of the belief that they engaged in actions to deserve it (Essien & Wood 2024). As a result, Black children may doubt their own character, believing that they "deserved the mistreatment" or are innately "bad." Educators can support Black children by being fair, consistent, and equitable as they work to identify the cause of an issue. If a Black child shares about an experience of mistreatment, educators should begin with the assumption that they are being truthful.

Conclusion

Treating all children with dignity is a core component of the NAEYC position statement on advancing equity (2019). In addition, educators are encouraged to uphold the inherent value and dignity of all children and their families. Mistreatment of young Black children has no place in the field of early childhood education nor should it be tolerated in any context. Black children should have the opportunity to be educated in environments where they are centered in the learning design, classroom interactions, and materials. Rather than allowing Black children to feel as if something is wrong with them, educators should learn about and celebrate each Black child's unique strengths and assets.

About the Authors

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Embedded Learning Supports for Young Children

Promoting Contemporary Perspectives About Inclusion and Inclusive Practices

Patricia Snyder

Early childhood inclusion and inclusive practices ensure that all young children (ages birth to 8 years) and their families have equitable access to quality early care and education programs *and* equitable opportunities to engage meaningfully as members of a learning community. In early childhood education, *inclusion* means that every child can access the range of interactions, curricular activities, and learning opportunities in a universally designed, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive early learning setting (Snyder et al. 2017). Access is necessary, but alone, it is not sufficient. The concept of *inclusive practices* is critical. Inclusive practices are what people do (their words, actions, and decisions) to support young children's participation and engagement in a group or structure. In early childhood, inclusive practices are environmental, interactional, and instructional actions or behaviors of adults and peers that support each child's engagement and learning in the spaces to which they and their families have access (Winton 2016). Inclusive practices ensure that all children receive the universal, differentiated, and individualized experiences they need to reach their unique and full potential (Snyder et al. 2017). By framing inclusive practices this way, linkages to equitable supports for all children's learning are enhanced.

Early childhood educators and other professionals have long advocated for inclusion and advancing inclusive practices for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with disabilities or developmental delays and their families (Vincent et al. 1981). As a former practitioner who entered the field in 1978 as a speech language therapist supporting infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and their families, I later obtained advanced degrees in special education with early intervention and early childhood emphases. I have also held other roles in the field, including as a teacher and director, supporting inclusion and inclusive practices for more than four decades. I believe it is important to understand the history of inclusion and inclusive practices as it helps inform our current and future policies, advocacy, and practices. In this article, I offer a brief history of inclusion and inclusive practices in early childhood education (focusing on birth through age 5). I examine the links between this history and the current practices of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), intentional teaching, and embedded learning supports in inclusive settings. I then describe a framework that organizes effective practices for embedded instruction and illustrate them through a vignette featuring two young children, Elijah and Isabella, who are part of an inclusive learning community.

A Brief History of the Evolution of Inclusion and Inclusive Practices

Inclusion has been a focus of advocacy, policy, research, and practice in early childhood for over 50 years; it is part of the early childhood education field's heritage. The emphasis on inclusion and inclusive practices has brought the disciplines of early intervention, early childhood special education, and early childhood education together to support the learning, development, and well-being of all young children in trusting partnerships with their families. The history of inclusion and inclusive practices can be seen in the laws and policies enacted, the perspectives that were prominent at different times, and the position statements that have been created to advocate for inclusion and high-quality early childhood experiences for all children.

History of Laws and Policies Supporting Inclusive Practices

Beginning as early as 1968, federal laws provided funding to support the development of community-based and evidence-informed programs, curricula, or interventions for young children with disabilities or developmental delays, their families, and the practitioners who supported them (Smith & Rous 2011). In 1972, a reauthorization of the Head Start Act expanded access to Head Start programs and classrooms, requiring that at least 10 percent of Head Start's enrollment include young children with disabilities. Head Start funded 14 Regional Access Projects to provide professional learning and technical assistance support to Head Start programs and teachers whose classroom members included young children with disabilities (OHS 2024). The pioneers of Head Start recognized that children with and without disabilities and their families would benefit from being together in early learning environments. Through partnerships with other federal agencies and local programs, Head Start helped lead the way toward a vision for inclusion (OHS 2021).

Public Law 94-142 was passed in 1975. Among its many provisions, this law specified that, to the maximum extent "practicable," special services should enable children to participate in regular educational programs with their peers. The *least restrictive environment* concept was part of this provision. This meant that, as much as possible, children with disabilities should be included in the same educational settings and activities with peers who did not have disabilities.

In 1986, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990) created an early intervention (initially known as Part H but now known as Part C) program for infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays and their families. It also expanded the Part B program to include a program for preschool-age children with disabilities, known as Section 619 of the Act. Since 1986, through successive reauthorizations, the law and related implementation policies guiding both programs have increasingly emphasized the importance of inclusion and inclusive practices (Smith & Rous 2011).

History of Perspectives on Inclusion and Inclusive Practices

Contemporary perspectives about the meaning of inclusion and inclusive practices can be traced back to two movements in the field that were prominent in the 1970s and 1980s: Normalization (Wolfensberger 1980) and mainstreaming (Turnbull 1982). *Normalization* emphasized the importance of creating socially valid roles and life conditions for those who might be marginalized, which at the time included individuals with disabilities. One important normalization principle that informed contemporary perspectives about inclusion and inclusive practices was that segregated living and segregated delivery of services for individuals with disabilities should evolve into community-based and community-referenced services and supports. *Community-referenced* meant living like those in a community and within similar settings, routines, and activities. *Mainstreaming* often was defined as the integration of children with disabilities into general education (or mainstream) environments (Turnbull 1982). The mainstreaming movement has often been identified as beginning with the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, which mandated a free and appropriate public education and special education and related services for children and youth with disabilities.

Specific to the field of early intervention and early childhood special education, perspectives about these movements and concepts evolved beginning in the late 1970s. They have been represented in the field's leading journals and in updates to recommended practices (DEC 2014; Snyder & Hemmeter 2018). For example, in 1981, Vincent and colleagues asserted that *integrated* programs in which young children with and without disabilities *interact and learn together* exemplified several principles of normalization and would be beneficial for both (emphasis added). In 1990, Fewell and Neisworth noted that "the education of young children with special needs in settings with peers without recognized needs is foremost on the list of goals of early childhood special educators. Ensuring that *integration* happens with no reduction in the quality or quantity of needed intervention is critical" (ix; emphasis added).

In the mid-1990s, a notable shift from a focus on mainstreaming to inclusion and inclusive practices was evident. There was growing recognition that children who were accessing inclusive settings should not be

expected to engage and learn in the setting without developmentally appropriate and individualized supports. In the foreword to an issue of *Topics in Early Childhood Education* in 1997, the editor, Judith Carta, described the need to learn more about both how to implement inclusive practices and how these practices affect learning outcomes and other aspects of children's and family's lives.

By 2015, Barton and Smith noted that the field had more resources, research, policies, and professional supports for inclusion than ever before. Nevertheless, they advocated for greater efforts to widely share information about effective inclusive practices and supporting their implementation in inclusive settings.

Position Statements on Inclusive Practices

Several organizations have collaborated over the years to issue position statements or policy statements about inclusion and inclusive practices. For example, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and NAEYC have collaborated since the early 1990s to create a shared vision of inclusion (Smith & Rous 2011), including creating a joint position statement on inclusion in 1993. DEC and NAEYC updated this position statement in 2009. The joint position statement recognized the "right of every infant and young child and his or her family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society" (DEC/NAEYC 2009, 2). It also identified the intended outcomes, including "a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential" (DEC/NAEYC 2009, 1). By calling out the defining features of inclusion—access, participation, and supports—the position statement helped families, educators, and policy makers "identify high quality early childhood programs and services" (DEC/NAEYC 2009, 1).

In 2023, the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education updated their 2015 policy statement focused on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs. Their original statement focused on providing a joint vision for inclusion and recommendations to states, local education agencies, schools, and private and public early childhood programs. It also shared

information about policy and research on inclusion and inclusive practices. Guidance and resources were offered to effect changes or enhancements to existing policies and practice (HHS & ED 2015). The revised statement was issued in response to what was described as "renewed commitment and urgency," given that data and the lived experiences of young children and their families showed they continue to face barriers in accessing and participating meaningfully in inclusive programs (ED & HHS 2023, 1).

The Need for Continued Advocacy

Despite ongoing efforts focused on advocacy, policies, research, and practice, a continued need exists to enact the contemporary vision for inclusion and inclusive practices. Data from 2022–2023 show that only about 37 percent of children ages 3 to 5 (not in kindergarten) with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) attend "regular early learning programs" at least 10 hours a week and receive the majority of their services in that location (OSEP 2024). This need is not limited to the United States. One of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals focused on quality education identified the following target: "By 2030, ensure that *all* girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary education" (UN 2024; emphasis added). In addition, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities declared that "an inclusive education system shall be ensured at all levels" and that "effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion" (GA 2006).

This brief history shows progress the field has made in advancing a shared vision for inclusion and why it is important. Contemporary policies and practices have been informed by 50 years of advocacy, research, experiences and wisdom from the field, and evolving societal values. It shows that inclusion is about more than access; it should embody practices that ensure access, acceptability, participation, and achievement (Tan, Devarakonda, & Rothe 2024).

Connections Among DAP, Intentional Teaching, and Embedded Learning Support Practices

While DEC and NAEYC have developed a dedicated position statement about inclusion, the field of early childhood also has a broader framework to guide practices for all young children: Developmentally appropriate practice. NAEYC's position statement on DAP describes "methods that promote each child's optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning" (NAEYC 2020, 5). DAP has been a foundation for ensuring all children have supportive early learning experiences to promote their learning, development, and well-being. Over the years, NAEYC's position statement and other resources on DAP have been revised based on what has been learned from research on child development and learning, the field's values, and collective experiences in practice (NAEYC 2020, 2022).

The current framework of DAP strongly emphasizes advancing equity. It includes principles and practices recognizing intersections among children's abilities, races, ethnicities, languages, cultures, and experiences, as well as the contexts of their homes, communities, and educators. It encompasses practices enacted when designing a learning environment, the activities and other learning opportunities that occur within it, and as part of the nurturing and responsive interactions between adults and children who are members of the learning community.

Within the DAP framework is the concept of intentional teaching. *Intentional teaching* involves making decisions about practices that will support all young children's learning and development while recognizing individual children's learning preferences, motivations, strengths, and needs; their earlier and current learning and developmental experiences; and the environments in which these have or are occurring. Three core and interrelated considerations for intentional teaching and decision making are "commonality in children's development and learning, individuality reflecting each child's unique characteristics and experiences, and the context in which learning and development occur" (NAEYC 2020, 6; 2022). These three core

considerations guide intentional teaching decisions (Bredekamp & Willer 2022). Intentional teaching helps inform decisions about what will be learned, when it will be learned, how learning will be supported, and how learning will be observed, assessed, and documented.

Young children with disabilities who are members of an inclusive learning community benefit from intentional teaching practices that include naturalistic instruction (Snyder et al. 2015). Naturalistic instruction practices are important for inclusion and contemporary inclusive practices. *Embedded instruction* is one type of naturalistic instructional approach, in which priority skills are worked into a child's everyday activities and routines by people who interact regularly with the child (Snyder, McLaughlin, et al. 2018). DAP's three core considerations described above for intentional teaching practices are still applicable. For example, practitioners consider the structural and process features of activities and routines that are common for all children in their settings and how these features might need to be adapted to provide embedded learning opportunities for children who need them (Snyder, McLaughlin et al. 2018). In addition, naturalistic embedded instruction practices help teaching teams, specialists, and families make collaborative decisions about priority skills linked to IEP goals.

Like intentional teaching, naturalistic embedded instruction focuses on what will be learned (What to Teach), when it will be learned (When to Teach), how learning will be supported (How to Teach), and how learning will be evaluated (How to Evaluate) (Snyder, McLaughlin et al. 2018). Research has shown that embedded learning supports and naturalistic instruction practices are important so that children with disabilities have sufficient opportunities and instruction to learn these key skills in addition to what they are learning as members of an inclusive classroom community (e.g., Snyder et al. 2015; Snyder, Hemmeter et al. 2018). Naturalistic embedded instruction practices are grounded in intentionality and have the following key features:

> The content of naturalistic embedded instruction focuses on learning targets or skills that will enhance the child's engagement, learning, development, and well-being. (What to Teach)

> The contexts in which naturalistic embedded instruction occurs are typical activities, routines, and experiences. (When to Teach)

> The adults and peers who support naturalistic embedded instruction are those who interact regularly with the child. (When to Teach)

> Each instructional opportunity is typically child-initiated or initiated by an adult or peer based on the child's focus of attention or interest (i.e., following the child's lead), and a natural or logically planned consequence follows the child's response. (How to Teach, How to Evaluate)

A Framework for Embedded Instruction

Embedded Instruction for Early Learning (EIEL) is a naturalistic embedded instruction framework developed to support contemporary perspectives about inclusion and use of effective inclusive practices (McLaughlin et al. 2011; Snyder, Hemmeter et al. 2018; Snyder, McLaughlin et al. 2018). It is based on a concept known as the 3Rs of Early Learning: Relationships, Repetition, and Routines (see Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies, n.d.). All children learn in the context of nurturing relationships or interactions. Repeated opportunities to practice skills in everyday activities and routines help children make neural connections. Children need to have these interactions and opportunities in safe, stable, predictable, engaging, meaningful, and motivating activities and routines. In addition, some children might need more repetition (or embedded learning opportunities) and intentional learning support within and across their everyday activities and routines and in the context of responsive relationships. This additional support occurs through embedded instruction practices.

Embedded instruction is an extension of intentional teaching and is a recommended instructional practice (DEC 2014). During ongoing interactions, activities, and routines, practitioners provide intentional and individualized learning opportunities and instructional support for learning targeted skills. (See "Parts of Embedded Instruction" at ceecs.education.ufl.edu/atoz/i-inclusion/I.)

My colleagues and I have found through our research that the EIEL practices enhance child engagement, learning, and social interactions in inclusive settings (Snyder et al. 2015; Snyder, Hemmeter et al. 2018). For those using DAP and making intentional teaching decisions, using EIEL practices will be a natural fit (McLaughlin et al. 2011).

Embedded Instruction in Action: Applying the EIEL Framework

Elijah, Isabella, and 13 of their peers are part of an inclusive preschool classroom. Both have IEPs to support their learning and developmental strengths and their needs. Elijah is 39 months old and has been part of an inclusive preschool classroom community for six months. He enjoys engaging in play with his peers, listening to stories and looking at books, and swinging on the playground. He engages in back-and-forth conversations with adults and peers and uses his walker effectively to move around the classroom and navigate the playground. One of his target skills is pouring from one container to another. Isabella is 50 months old and has been part of the same classroom community as Elijah for over a year. Isabella likes to play with blocks and balls, draw and paint, and take care of the plants in the outside nature center. She has brief back-and-forth communicative exchanges with adults and often engages in solitary play. One of Isabella's learning goals is to ask a peer to play.

At breakfast, a pitcher of juice is available for all of the children. Ms. Pat asks, "Elijah, do you want to pour some juice in your cup?" and hands Elijah the pitcher. Elijah pours the juice into his cup and drinks.

During child-initiated play, Isabella is playing in the block center. Mr. Larry is with the children in the block area and encourages them to play together to build a tall tower. He says, "Isabella, why don't you ask a friend to build with you? You can say, 'Would you build with

me?' " Isabella turns to Nora and says, "Build with me?" Nora responds, "Okay!" and they begin to build a tower together.

In the vignette above, everyone had a vision for inclusion that ensured all children in the classroom community experienced a sense of belonging, positive social relationships and friendships, and learning and development opportunities to reach their unique and full potential (DEC/NAEYC 2009). Elijah and Isabella were part of an inclusive classroom community where they received support from a team that included their teachers, families, and communication and motor specialists. Elijah's and Isabella's teams were committed to supporting them through naturalistic embedded instruction practices—which build on DAP and intentional teaching—to realize this inclusive vision. The team used the parts and practices of the EIEL framework to guide their actions. In the sections that follow, I will illustrate further how they applied What to Teach, When to Teach, How to Teach, and How to Evaluate embedded instruction practices.

What to Teach

What to Teach focuses on the content of embedded learning, or *target skills*. Target skills are those that a child's team has identified as priority skills for them to learn "right now" (i.e., within their zones of proximal development) and for which they would benefit from additional naturalistic embedded instruction opportunities (repetitions) to learn them.

When planning what to teach, Elijah's and Isabella's teams considered what they were supporting all children in the learning community to experience and learn. They used learning or developmental progressions reflected in early learning foundations or standards documents, curricular frameworks, and curricula used in the classroom setting to guide them. Because Elijah and Isabella had IEPs, the individualized goals, which were identified as learning priorities by the entire team, also helped inform decisions about identifying and aligning target skills for embedded instruction. By identifying target skills and aligning them with what all children in the setting were doing or learning as well as with Elijah's and Isabella's IEPs, the team put **What to Teach** practices into action.

When to Teach

In the EIEL framework, What to Teach and When to Teach are interconnected. Embedded learning means that opportunities to practice target skills and learn them happen in the activities and routines that are part of the learning community (Snyder, McLaughlin et al. 2018). Elijah's and Isabella's teams considered which activities and routines would provide multiple (repeated), meaningful, and motivating embedded learning opportunities for them to practice and learn target skills. They considered the fit between the target skill and the routine or activity that would include the embedded learning opportunities.

For example, Elijah's team considered which routines or activities would be a good fit for a target skill focused on pouring liquid from one container into another. They identified multiple opportunities to pour throughout the day and in routines and activities that were meaningful and motivating for Elijah. These included pouring liquids from a pitcher into a cup during breakfast and snack, pouring water from a cup into a funnel at the water table, pouring sand from a cup into a bucket in the sandbox on the playground, and pouring paint into a container as part of a shared painting activity.

Meanwhile, Isabella's team considered which routines or activities would be a good fit for a target skill focused on using at least two words to ask peers to play with her. Although they knew that there were many opportunities throughout the day to practice and learn this target skill, they also knew Isabella was not motivated to ask peers to play with her in many activities or places in the classroom without their support. They created a fit for opportunities to practice and learn the target skill by modeling how to ask peers to play during three of Isabella's favorite activities: Block play, taking care of plants in the outside nature center, and painting pictures.

An activity matrix is often used in EIEL to guide When to Teach practices. The matrix is completed after teams consider the fit between the target skill and opportunities to support it. The matrix helps the team plan for, implement, and evaluate embedded learning. For example, a matrix for Elijah would show his target skill (pouring) and the activities or routines in which he would have embedded opportunities to practice and learn it (breakfast, water table play, sandbox play).

Examples of A-B-C Embedded Instruction Learning Links

	To Support Elijah		To Support Isabella	
	During breakfast	**During art**	**During center time**	**During art**
Target skill	Pouring from one container to another	Pouring from one container to another	Ask a peer to play	Ask a peer to play
Context and materials	All the children are eating breakfast at the table. A juice pitcher is available for children to use when they want to pour some into their cup. Elijah's cup is empty.	All children are engaged in a shared painting activity. They are wearing smocks. Elijah and Mackenzie, a classmate, are painting a blue, red, and yellow rainbow. After painting for a while, the container with blue paint is empty. Elijah goes to the art table, picks up the bottle of blue paint, and brings it back to the easel where they are painting.	All children are either engaged in child-initiated play or a teacher-directed center activity. Isabella is playing in the block area. Mr. Larry is supporting children in the block area and encouraging them to play together to build a tall tower.	All children are engaged in a shared painting activity. They are wearing smocks. Isabella is standing by an easel but is not painting with a classmate yet. Ms. Pat is supporting children with the shared painting activity and sees that Isabella is not painting and that Tyrone, who is standing near Isabella, also is not yet painting.
Antecedent (A)	Ms. Pat says, "Elijah, do you want to pour some juice in your cup?" and hands Elijah the pitcher.	Elijah has the bottle of blue paint, and the empty container for blue paint is on the easel.	Mr. Larry says, "Isabella, why don't you ask a friend to build with you? You can say, 'Would you build with me?'"	Ms. Pat says, "Isabella, why don't you ask Tyrone to paint with you? You can say, 'Would you paint with me?'"
Behavior (B)	Elijah pours the juice from the pitcher into the cup.	Elijah pours the blue paint from the bottle into the easel container.	Isabella says to Nora, "Build with me?"	Isabella says, "Paint with me?"
Consequence (C)	Elijah drinks his juice.	Elijah and Mackenzie continue to paint the blue part of the rainbow.	Nora says, "Okay!" Then, Isabella and Nora start building a tower together.	Tyrone says, "Yes!" Then, Isabella and Tyrone start painting together.

The matrix also shows the number of opportunities planned during each activity or routine to practice the target skill, the materials that are needed to support embedded instruction on the target skill, and who will support opportunities and instruction. It can also be used as a place to record how many times Elijah does the target skill. For examples of activity matrices and how to develop and use them, see Gauvreau and Sandall 2018; Snyder, McLaughlin et al. 2018; and Coogle et al. 2021.

How to Teach

The How to Teach practice describes how naturalistic embedded instruction is provided. An A-B-C learning link includes the essential parts of instruction. The A link is the *antecedent*, or prompt or cue, for a target skill. Antecedents can be people, materials, or events that are part of an activity or routine that prompt or cue the child to do the target skill. The B link is the *behavior* or target skill. The C link is the *consequence*.

A consequence follows the target skill behavior. It is something positive—either something people do or something that happens in the environment—that is linked to the target skill behavior. Natural or logical positive consequences increase the likelihood that the child will try to do or will do the skill again when similar antecedents occur. "Examples of A-B-C Embedded Instruction Learning Links" on page 82 shows examples of complete A-B-C embedded learning links for Elijah's target skill focused on pouring from one container to another and for Isabella's target skill focused on using at least two words to ask peers to play. All components of A-B-C learning links are essential as part of intentional teaching and embedded instruction to ensure children learn target skills linked to learning goals or outcomes (Barton et al. 2014).

How to Evaluate

The fourth part of the EIEL framework involves practices that help inform decisions about if embedded learning opportunities are occurring, if A-B-C learning links are complete, and if a child is making progress on learning or has learned a target skill.

Answers to these three How to Evaluate questions help guide future decisions about What to Teach, When to Teach, and How to Teach:

› **Are we doing it?** Teams collect information about whether a child has sufficient embedded opportunities to learn target skills in activities and routines that are a good fit. They determine how many of the embedded opportunities are complete A-B-C learning links. For example, Isabella should have at least three opportunities to ask a peer to play across play/centers, outdoor play and nature center, and art. When these embedded opportunities occurred, the team recorded if they were complete A-B-C learning links.

› **Is it working?** The team gathers information to help decide whether the child is learning or has learned the target skills. For example, the team used the recorded information about the number of times Isabella's target skill occurred across the week to help decide if she was making progress or had learned the target skill.

› **Do we need to make changes?** Based on answers to the first two questions, teams might decide to change the number or type of embedded

learning opportunities and complete A-B-C learning links, the activities and routines in which embedded learning opportunities occur, or the target skill. For example, the information gathered showed Isabella asked peers to play consistently after Ms. Pat, Mr. Larry, or other adults prompted or cued her to do so. They decided to decrease their support and see if Isabella would initiate asking a peer to play without adult support.

Barton et al. (2014) described strategies for collecting information to inform How to Evaluate decisions.

Conclusion

The early childhood field has been advocating for inclusion and enacting policies, conducting research, and sharing information about evidence-informed inclusion and inclusive practices for more than 50 years. Nevertheless, data and lived experiences to date suggest more can and must be done. Too many families continue to encounter barriers when they express their priorities for their young children with disabilities to belong and learn alongside their peers in inclusive classrooms and communities (Moore 2022). Collaborating as a unified field and establishing trusting partnerships with families will ensure that the contemporary vision and values about inclusion and inclusive practices are realized. Through the use of DAP, intentional teaching, and naturalistic embedded learning support practices like those reflected in the EIEL framework, early childhood educators can support all children to reach their unique and full potential.

Our Proud Heritage, coedited by Grace Jepkemboi Komol, PhD, and Jerry Aldridge, EdD, shares insights from the history of early childhood education to help educators develop teaching goals and objectives today. By considering the origins of ideas and programs, early childhood education professionals can better understand the present and make greater progress in the early childhood field.

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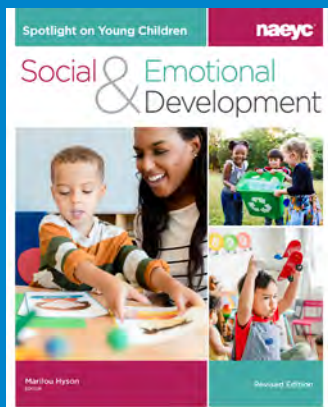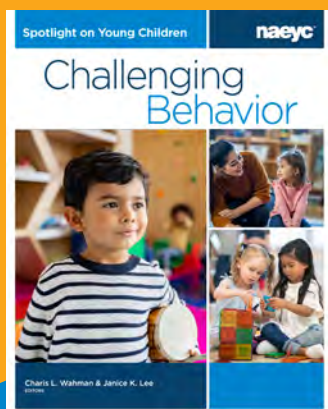
Creating Equitable Environments for Our Youngest Learners

Focusing on Black Boys

Lisa Wilson

In a busy toddler classroom, 2-year-old Malik happily builds a tower of blocks when another child knocks it over. In an instant, Malik's joy turns to frustration, and he kicks the remaining blocks on the floor, his face tense and body rigid. His teacher, Ms. Green, observes the situation and walks over calmly. "It's hard when your tower gets knocked down," she says, sitting beside him. She takes a deep breath and models a slow exhale. Malik follows her lead, taking deep breaths until his body relaxes. Together, they rebuild the tower as they talk about how to handle big feelings like frustration.

This scene is familiar in many early childhood learning environments. Yet educators of Black boys across the early childhood years often misunderstand or misinterpret developmentally appropriate behaviors. Rather than responding with care and coregulation strategies, as Ms. Green did, they instead view behaviors like pushing, grabbing, and yelling as threatening or problematic when exhibited by Black boys (Wright 2019). This often results in soft expulsions and suspensions, over-disciplining, and/or suspending and expelling Black boys (Murphy et al. 2024)—even in programs serving infants and toddlers. For example, a survey of 368 community-based programs in one state found that within a 12-month period, at least 197 children were expelled. Nearly 24 percent of them were between the ages of 0 and 2 (Giordano et al. 2022). Across these participating programs, researchers also found that Black children were almost three-and-half times more likely to be suspended than students of other racial backgrounds (Giordano et al. 2021).

While still an emerging area of research, educators and administrators who work with infants and toddlers must intentionally examine their practices and decisions impacting these children. While much of the research on inequitable treatment in educational settings focuses on older children, Black boys are disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline practices starting in preschool and even earlier. During the 2020–2021 school year, for example, the US Department of Education found that Black preschool children accounted for 17 percent of preschool enrollment but "represented 31 percent of children who received one or more out-of-school suspensions and 25 percent of those expelled" (OCR 2023, 6).

In my work as an early childhood practitioner and social justice advocate, understanding developmentally appropriate practices is crucial. At Zero to Three, I have had the opportunity to contribute to efforts that provide a framework for quality teaching and learning in Head Start programs. Such an equity-focused mindset helps to create infant and toddler settings that are culturally strengths-based and that affirm the identities of Black boys. NAEYC's "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" position statement (2019) also serves as a powerful roadmap for educators striving to achieve this vision. It provides a framework to help educators as they examine personal biases, adopt equitable teaching practices, and foster environments where Black boys are seen, valued, and supported in their unique identities.

This article highlights the principles, strategies, and actionable steps necessary to cultivate infant and toddler learning spaces that are deeply loving and positive as well as inclusive. Given what research and my professional experiences have shown, I offer details about how these spaces can be sustained for Black boys in particular. In addition, by following the strategies outlined here, educators can build caring, equitable learning communities that nurture connection, promote emotional support, and uphold the dignity of each and every child.

Understanding Implicit Bias

Implicit bias is defined as unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that affect educators' understandings, actions, and decisions, ultimately shaping their interactions with children (NAEYC 2019). Research on the impact of implicit bias in early childhood settings is growing, revealing that educators of young children—like all people—are not immune to it, even when they believe they hold no *explicit* biases (e.g., Gilliam et al. 2016; Wymer et al. 2020).

Implicit biases are associated with differential judgments about and treatment of children by race, gender, ability, body type, physical appearance, and social, economic, and language status. These biases limit children's opportunities to reach their full potential. They also result in differential judgments about children's play, aggressiveness, compliance,

initiative, and abilities (NAEYC 2019), creating inequitable learning environments for children of color (APA 2012; Weir 2016).

This lens of bias begins early. Studies have shown that even in infancy and toddlerhood, children of color are at the highest risk of expulsion from early care and education programs, with implicit bias identified as a significant factor (APA 2012). Beginning in preschool, implicit bias is linked to lower rates of achievement, fewer referrals to gifted programs, and disproportionately higher rates of suspension and expulsion for Black children, especially boys (Wright 2019). These practices, including expulsion in the early years, can also contribute to long-term educational inequities (e.g., Lieberman & Loewenberg 2022; Zinsser et al. 2022). If educators' biases are not addressed, Black boys may experience greater stress levels and difficulty managing their emotions (Mondi & Reynolds 2021). They also may experience more impulsivity and less control over their actions (Cuartas et al. 2022).

The Role of Reflection

Understanding the power of implicit bias to exclude and stigmatize Black boys requires early childhood educators—including infant and toddler teachers—to examine the "expectations, practices, curriculum, and/or policies [that] may contribute (perhaps unwittingly) to inequitable outcomes for children and take steps to change them" (NAEYC 2019, 6). Self-reflection is crucial: Educators must examine their perceptions of Black boys and recognize, address, and challenge the deficit views that contribute to how they interpret Black boys' behavior. This is a first, integral step to creating an equitable, supportive environment that promotes fairness and inclusivity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020).

Reflection is an ongoing commitment that requires intentionality and a steadfast commitment to equity (APA 2012; NAEYC 2019). It involves asking oneself challenging questions about expectations and assumptions for Black boys, such as

> ❯ "How do I view the Black boys in my learning environment?"

> ❯ "Do I hold lower expectations for their developmental milestones and learning abilities?"

> "Do I hold higher expectations for them behaviorally?"

> "Am I more likely to interpret their behaviors as aggressive?"

These questions can help educators examine their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and consider how those may affect their interactions with children of color (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins).

Strategies for Shifting Mindsets and Actions

To align with the goals of equitable education, educators must cultivate specific dispositions that allow them to create environments where Black boys feel genuinely valued and represented (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020; Allen et al. 2021). In early childhood settings, these dispositions include empathy and the ability to view each child through a culturally responsive, strengths-based lens (OHS 2022).

For example, when Malik (from the opening vignette) kicked over his tower, Ms. Green recognized that he needed a calm, supportive adult to help him navigate his emotions. Rather than interpreting his behavior as aggressive or violent and reprimanding him, she worked to understand his interests, strengths, and needs and to help guide him toward constructive responses to challenging situations. Such a culturally responsive, strengths-based approach fosters emotional growth and resilience.

Early childhood educators can work to adopt equitable teaching dispositions in several ways. Following are some strategies for shifting mindsets in the infant and toddler setting.

Equity-Mindedness

Early childhood educators must reject the notion that Black boys are less capable. Instead, they should adopt a strengths-based perspective that values each child's unique abilities and experiences (Blake et al. 2011; NAEYC 2019). This shift in mindset ensures that Black boys are viewed through a lens that supports their full inclusion, focusing on their potential and assets rather than any perceived deficits. Educators should also recognize that behaviors perceived as problematic may stem from cultural expressions and should not

be disproportionately disciplined. As Ferrette (2016) notes, disproportionate and biased disciplinary practices can lead to lasting trauma for Black children in early childhood settings, impacting their academic, social, and emotional growth.

In infant and toddler settings, educators can create an inclusive environment by offering "meaningful, relevant, and appropriately challenging activities across all interests and abilities" (NAEYC 2019, 7). Children of all races, genders, and abilities should see themselves and their families, languages, and cultures regularly and meaningfully reflected in settings and learning materials. This approach aligns with the principles of anti-bias education, in which each child feels respected, seen, and supported as they engage with learning experiences that affirm their identities and encourage their development (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, with Goins 2020).

Empathy and Understanding

Empathy is essential to creating a setting where Black boys feel safe and valued. It allows educators to interpret Black boys' behavior with intention and care rather than viewing it as aggressive or problematic. It also creates an inclusive environment where young children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, feel understood and respected, promoting a foundation of trust and emotional security (Gay 2010).

For example, when Ms. Green sees a Black boy expressing frustration by throwing toys or vocalizing loudly, she can approach calmly and acknowledge the child's emotions ("I can see you're feeling upset"). Instead of viewing the behavior as disruptive, she can model calming techniques, such as taking deep breaths. She can also guide the child to a sensory area with items like soft toys or textured fabrics, where the child can explore his feelings safely. By responding with empathy and offering supportive choices, she helps children learn to manage emotions constructively.

Dr. Roderick Carey's work on mattering emphasizes that educators must actively affirm children's value to combat feelings of exclusion. When Black boys experience *marginal mattering* ("minimal recognition that implies their insignificance") and *partial mattering* ("selectively valuing certain talents and attributes they embody"), they are less likely to engage

and succeed in their educational settings (Carey 2019, 373). These ideas can be applied to early learning settings: If, for example, a toddler consistently brings a favorite book or toy to share with his teacher but is routinely told to wait while other children receive immediate attention, this may signal to him that his interests or presence is not valued equally.

By contrast, *comprehensive mattering* occurs through relationships and when Black boys are authentically valued and recognized as important members in their learning communities (Carey 2019). This might involve a teacher noticing and responding thoughtfully to a child's interests during self-directed or free play, making time to engage with him directly, and integrating his interests into the day's learning activities. These and other strategies contribute to Black boys feeling fully included and valued as significant members in their learning settings and beyond (Carey 2019).

Intentionality in Practice

Creating an environment where Black boys fully matter requires intentional practice. Educators must consistently examine their interactions, responses to behavior and disciplinary approaches, and overall management of the learning setting to ensure inclusivity and belonging. This may require intentional shifts in practice. For example, a toddler teacher might purposefully engage with a Black boy during self-directed play, showing genuine interest in his chosen activities and strengths. If the child expresses joy in building with blocks, the teacher could join him, narrating their shared experience and recognizing his creativity and effort. These moments affirm his full place in the classroom or program.

By using these strategies intentionally, educators ensure that Black boys feel valued and supported across developmental domains. This, in turn, lays a foundation for trust and positive identity development (Gay 2010; OHS 2022).

Building Equitable Relationships with Families

The bonds between family and child form the foundation of a child's identity. Indeed, children's early relationships with families and other home caregivers significantly impact their emotional development and sense of security (Bowlby 1969; Lally & Mangione 2017). When families' rich cultural knowledge, values, and experiences are acknowledged, children feel seen, understood, and emotionally secure, which enhances their emerging sense of self (NAEYC 2019; OHS 2022).

For Black boys, family plays an essential role in shaping their identities, self-concepts, and resilience by providing support, cultural grounding, and positive role modeling (OHS 2022). Educators gain valuable insights into families' strengths and funds of knowledge when they develop strong reciprocal relationships (NAEYC 2020). By centering family relationships, educators create an ecosystem that nurtures Black boys' identity development, recognizing that family is at the heart of who they are.

Viewing Families as an Asset

An asset-based approach encourages educators to shift their perspectives from focusing on the deficits of marginalized groups to recognizing their strengths and contributions. Rather than viewing Black boys or their families through a lens of struggle or disadvantage, educators should recognize the cultural wealth and knowledge that families bring to the table.

The lived experiences of families—such as storytelling, cooking, or community organizing—should be integrated into educational settings and activities (Moll et al. 1992; González et al. 2005). By embedding family and cultural experiences into the learning environment, educators can strengthen Black boys' connections between home and school, providing emotional security and promoting positive social interactions (OHS 2024). These practices also foster

an inclusive environment that enhances Black boys' overall development and sense of empowerment (Gay 2010).

Infant and toddler educators can nurture both home-to-school and community-to-school connections in several ways, such as

> Inviting families to share stories from their cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. Learning about families' languages, customs, activities, values, and beliefs allows educators to provide culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining learning environments (NAEYC 2019). It also allows children to see that their families and cultures hold an essential place in the learning setting and to experience their families' histories as part of the learning day.

> Singing the same lullabies or songs during naptime that families sing. This practice supports a child's social and emotional development by providing comfort through familiar routines. It also affirms children's cultural identity and fosters a sense of belonging.

> Partnering with community organizations that represent and celebrate the cultural backgrounds of Black families. These could include local Black churches, African American cultural centers, and nonprofit organizations like the National Black Child Development Institute (nbcdi.org), Jack and Jill of America Inc. (jackandjillinc.org), or the Jack and Jill Foundation (jackandjillfoundation.org). Invite representatives of these groups to share culturally relevant storytelling, music, or family traditions. Besides engaging Black infants, toddlers, and their families, these partnerships will give educators a nuanced understanding of the Black community's strengths, values, and challenges.

> Partnering with historically Black fraternities and sororities.

> Partnering with local chapters of Black community health organizations to gain insights into culturally sensitive approaches to childrearing, wellness, and early learning that are meaningful to Black families."

Wrapping Up

By implementing the strategies and partnerships outlined here, teachers can create learning environments that reflect and center infants' and toddlers' cultural identities. Most important, these actions help early childhood educators foster a learning culture that celebrates Black boys' lives and supports their cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Taking a strengths-based approach to acknowledging families' funds of knowledge and integrating family culture into curricula communicate to Black boys that they are fully seen and accepted. And what is the result of being fully seen? It is Black boys feeling that they fully matter.

Think About It

> Reflect on a recent challenging behavior you observed in your setting. How did you respond? On reflection, was your response appropriate and consistent with your responses to other children behaving similarly? If not, how might you notice and interrupt this pattern in the future?

> What steps do you take to ensure that your setting reflects the families and cultures of Black boys? What changes could you make to affirm their identities more intentionally?

> How can you build the ongoing work of self-reflection into your daily routines to create a genuinely equitable environment? What steps can you take to consider your responses to the questions mentioned in the "Role of Reflection" section above?

Rocking and Rolling is written by infant and toddler specialists and contributed by ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization working to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers by translating research and knowledge into a range of practical tools and resources for use by the adults who influence the lives of young children.

Try It

› Prioritize building nurturing, positive relationships with Black boys in your infant and toddler classroom or program. Engage with them consistently, paying close attention to their cues and responses. Spend time learning about their interests, preferences, and unique ways of interacting with their environment, showing that you genuinely value their individual experiences and cultural backgrounds. (For example, observe their favorite toys, sounds, or activities, and incorporate these into daily routines.)

› As you gain insights into Black boys' interests, look for ways to create developmentally appropriate sensory and interactive learning experiences that reflect and build upon them.

› Proactively recognize and affirm the strengths of Black boys in your infant and toddler classroom or program. Instead of concentrating on behaviors to change, highlight and celebrate their positive actions and decisions throughout the day to help them develop a strong sense of self-worth and confidence. (For example, if a child shares a toy, responds with curiosity, or persists at a new task, acknowledge these actions by naming them specifically: "I saw how you shared your toy with a friend—that was very kind"; "You kept trying to stack those blocks, even when they fell down. That shows great determination!")

› Make a plan to consistently connect with the families of Black boys in your setting to learn about how they might contribute to program activities.

› Set up a reflection journal to regularly examine your biases and assumptions. Document moments when you felt challenged by a child's behavior, then consider how implicit biases might have shaped your response.

› Seek out and read books and articles to help you in this work (see "Suggested Resources for Learning How to Honor Black Boys," which is available to NAEYC members in their member profile).
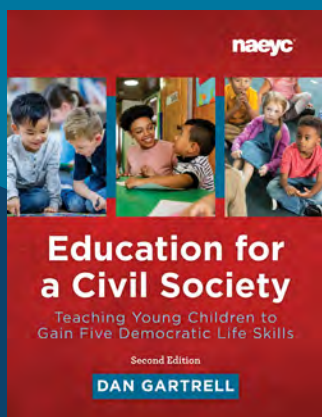
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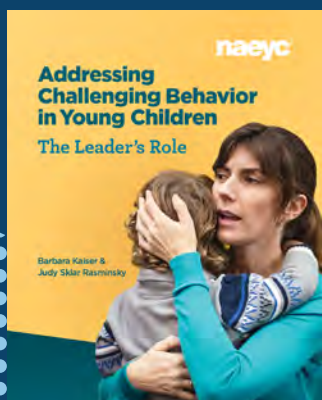
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The Reading Chair

New children's books too good to miss

As educators choose books for read alouds and for their book collections, they need to consider the individual strengths and interests of the children in their settings. Children who aren't drawn to narrative fiction may appreciate nonfiction texts, such as informational texts about transportation or animals and biographies about noteworthy people.

This edition of The Reading Chair features several nonfiction titles. Nonfiction picture books are fabulous resources. They teach children (and adults!) not just facts about the world, but also how to think critically, how to categorize information, and how to build upon a knowledge base. Nonfiction titles may be obviously factual, like *Sleepy: Surprising Ways Animals Snooze* and *Katie, Big and Strong*. Titles like *Moomin Words Tummy Time* teach children about real objects in the world around them. *Not Just the Driver!* contains fictionalized scenes of different modes of transportation, all in the service of teaching children how transit teams work together in real life.

Children should have access to and be read many different types of texts, which can be grouped around a topic, theme, or question. Knowing this, we include one fiction picture book that we love–*Hornbeam All In*. Back matter is an important resource for teachers who want to extend the material in their settings. But the heart of the book, whether fiction or nonfiction, is the part that children will read again and again and should stand on its own. We hope that these titles inspire you to consider the individual qualities and interests of the children in your setting.

-Isabel Baker and Miriam Baker Schiffer
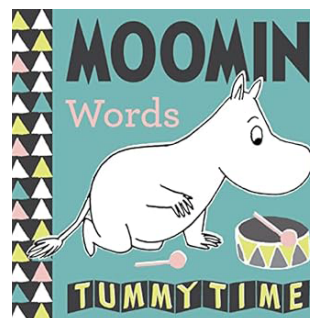
Moomin Words Tummy Time

By Tove Jansson. 2023. Boxer Books. 12 pages. Ages 0 to 3.

Tove Jansson, a Finnish author and artist, published the first book in her Moomin series—a novel featuring imaginary characters called Moomins—in 1945. Within a few years, many successful Moomin novels and picture books followed. Her lovable and bewitching characters continue to be published posthumously. In this foldout board book for the very young, one everyday object is featured per page (sun, drum, boat, apple, and more). The illustrations feature bold black and white patterns that babies are drawn to, infused with color (mauve, teal, avocado green). The book unfolds in a zigzag pattern and can stand up on its own, so infants can examine it while they lie flat. The book has plenty to hold the interest of toddlers too, with Moomin characters interacting with the featured objects. A Moomin plays peekaboo on the first page, to start things off invitingly, and rests on a cloud on the last page, signaling a soothing wrap-up to this mini-adventure through the world of words.
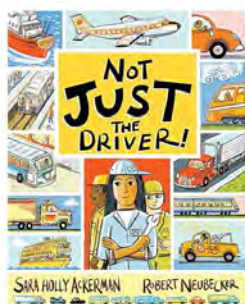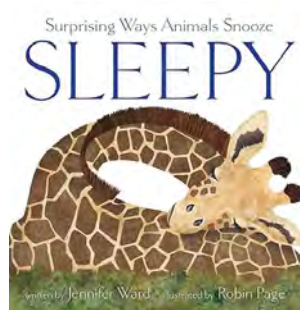
Not Just the Driver!

By Sara Holly Ackerman. Illus. by Robert Neubecker. 2024. Beach Lane Books. 32 pages. Ages 2 to 7.

Young transportation enthusiasts will love poring over the information and illustrations in this story about teamwork. On each spread, readers meet a driver—a truck driver, a subway car operator, and a boat captain, to name just a few—and then learn about all the supporting jobs that help those drivers do their work. There are dispatchers, signal maintainers, ticket agents, mechanics, and more, all helping the driver get from point A to point B. Rhyming words (*freight* and *interstate*, *dock* and *clock*) add zip. Neubecker's illustrations fill every page with delightful details. This book can spark discussion about how different team members' roles and responsibilities make a team work. It can also serve as a jumping off point for discussions of jobs in other familiar settings, such as the grocery store, the doctor's office, and around the neighborhood.

Sleepy: Surprising Ways Animals Snooze

By Jennifer Ward. Illus. by Robin Page. 2024. Beach Lane Books. 32 pages. Ages 2 to 12.

Two masters of nonfiction storytelling, Jennifer Ward and Robin Page, combine forces in this wonderful book about the different ways that animals sleep. It is a treasure trove of information about the fascinating and varied sleep habits of the animal kingdom. Each page or spread features an animal—such as the elephant, who sleeps only two hours per day, and the snake, who looks awake even while dozing. Younger children may enjoy acting out the animal sleep positions and sharing their own bedtime routines. Rich back matter provides a glossary and a graphically interesting way of comparing sleep across species.

About the Authors

Isabel Baker, MAT, MLS, is the founding director of The Book Vine for Children, a national company dedicated to getting good books into the hands of preschool children and their teachers. Isabel has worked as a children's librarian and is currently a presenter on early literacy and book selection.
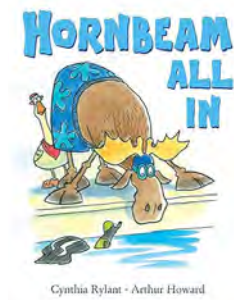
Miriam Baker Schiffer, MFA, is a writer in Brooklyn, New York. She consults on book selections for The Book Vine, in McHenry, Illinois. Miriam's children's book, *Stella Brings the Family,* was published by Chronicle Books in 2015.

Hornbeam All In

By Cynthia Rylant. Illus. by Arthur Howard. 2023. Beach Lane Books. 48 pages. Ages 4 to 8.

We love Hornbeam and his animal friends! In three short stories that can be read together or separately, readers follow along as this group navigates everyday hurdles. In the first story, Hornbeam desperately jockeys for a big serving of a favorite dish at a picnic. In the second story, a friend is kind to him in an especially trying moment (there's snoring and sleeplessness involved). And in the third, Hornbeam faces his fear of swimming. The pals are authentically childlike: Sometimes pushy, sometimes vexed, but also determined, earnest, and conscientious. The artful illustrations are lighthearted and emotive, a perfect match for the text. Rylant and Howard are brilliant at blending real emotion with humor, as evidenced in the final scene of the book, in which Hornbeam has earned a swimming certificate. He's not sure he likes swimming, but he sure likes that certificate. Pretty relatable! Teachers can invite children to share their perspectives on the uncomfortable parts of each story—if they've ever wanted something as much as Hornbeam wanted potato salad, what they might have done if a friend had snored through the entire night like Hornbeam did, and if there are any activities they do that they don't particularly like.
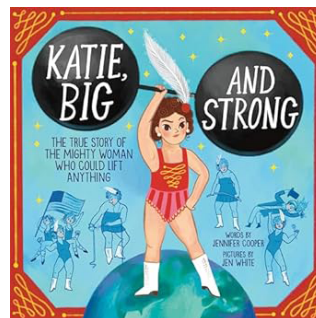
Katie, Big and Strong: The True Story of the Mighty Woman Who Could Lift Anything

By Jennifer Cooper. Illus. by Jen White. 2024. Sourcebooks Explore. 48 pages. Ages 4 to 8.

This is the true story of Katie Sandwina, a circus strongwoman turned suffragist. Katie, who grew up in Europe in a big circus family of strong people, was recognized—and sometimes shamed—for her strength and size. But she persisted in pursuing what she cared about, whether that was lifting heavy objects or marrying an unlikely man (short and skinny!) for love. After a successful career, she became a suffragist in the United States, using her strength to uplift all women. Back matter narrates Katie's story in more detail. Katie's story is a great jumping off point for conversations about different types of strength and embracing one's own talents. It can also support learning about voting and its history in the United States.

LISTENING, LEARNING, GROWING TOGETHER.

In 2025, we're unveiling exciting changes to the NAEYC experience to elevate how we support the early childhood education field.

A new, enhanced experience gives early childhood professionals the support, connections and resources needed to make a difference. Together, we are reimagining how we support the field and the vital work being done.

A TASTE OF WHAT'S TO COME:

- Universal Membership Benefits for Professionals. For more information, visit: **NAEYC.org/cares2025**
- Streamlined Learning Quality Assessment and Accreditation. For more information, visit: **NAEYC.org/accreditation-changes**

Education professionals are the heart of NAEYC's mission, and this evolution is guided by one goal: To better serve the industry and the future of our children.

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