

Nurturing Early Childhood Development — At Home and At School



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Early childhood education sets the foundation for a lifetime of learning, and the right experience provides a launch pad for success.

Navigating the transition to preschool is typically a source of both excitement and uncertainty for caregivers, and that may be more the case today than ever.

Some research has shown that babies born during the pandemic may be behind developmentally, compared with previous cohorts, largely because of a lack of exposure to traditional social settings like playdates or daycare. **Yet, other research is emerging** that paints a far more positive picture as it suggests the pandemic's effects may be muted, with younger children encountering fewer obstacles than initially anticipated.

Given these mixed signals, early childhood educators and allied professionals face a challenging situation as they aim to meet varied student needs while quelling caregiver concerns.

Initiating a strong partnership with helpful resources, guidance and support will have a significant impact that pays dividends throughout a child's educational career. As educators and professionals help these young students navigate the learning environment, it's also crucial to prioritize family involvement to empower caregivers and foster an enriching environment at home and school. Read on to discover five key building blocks that contribute to early childhood accomplishment and confidence.



Building Block 1: Collaborating for student achievement

Every child has their own set of skills, strengths, needs and personality traits, so they may enter the school system with a wildly different foundation than other children. It's up to early childhood educators, allied professionals and caregivers to work together to create a supportive environment for the developmental supergrowth that happens at this critical stage of life.

Adopting a multidisciplinary team approach can bolster positive outcomes. The early education team may include professionals like classroom teachers, speech-language pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists, all of whom bring a unique lens when evaluating a child's capabilities. "One of us might look at a child and see one particular thing, and another might add another perspective based on our expertise," explains Shelley Hughes, OTR (registered

occupational therapist) and director of portfolio management and delivery for Pearson.

Involving professionals across disciplines brings together insights that create a more comprehensive and nuanced view of a child's capabilities and needs. For example, Becky Whalen, CCC-SLP (speech-language pathologist) and Pearson assessment consultant, knows that the environment can impact language capabilities in a child with sensory sensitivities. "I have to understand the types of adjustments that will benefit each child for optimal treatment," she says.

While early childhood education professionals can provide experienced input, caregivers must be at the center of the team, says Kathleen Woodward, nationally certified school psychologist and regional manager, West U.S., Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean for Pearson.

"At this age, children spend the bulk of their time with their caregivers rather than in an educational setting, so that's where the majority of interventions will take place. In order for that child to grow and be successful, it's essential to earn buy-in for shared goals from those who are spending the most time with them."

Kathleen Woodward, Nationally Certified School Psychologist and regional manager, West U.S., Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean for Pearson

Building Block 2: Understanding the implications of milestones

Every child progresses on their own clock. Some kids prefer to observe extensively before trying a new skill. Others dive right in, opting for a process of trial and error. As a result, it can be difficult to determine when a child is experiencing a delay and needs additional support. For example, how do you tell when a child who appears to be struggling with identifying shapes is observing and processing until they feel ready or experiencing a language delay that requires attention?

This variability can naturally make it challenging for caregivers to recognize if their child is progressing on schedule. Particularly if they have had limited exposure to other children, some caregivers might be unaware of the milestones that are typically reached around this age and will rely on the expertise of early childhood educators.

A good place to start is by sharing resources such as the **“CDC’s Developmental Milestones”** to help level set expectations. For example, **by age three**, most children can identify and describe actions in a picture book, talk well enough for others to understand them and put on some articles of clothing by themselves.

While many core milestones are well-known, it’s easy for caregivers to overlook more subtle signs that indicate their child may need more support. As they assess their child’s progress, sometimes they mentally check a box for something they believe their child can do. However, there may be a gap between what their child *can* do independently, *chooses* to do independently, or the extent to which they rely on their caregiver, known as “adaptive behavior.”





For example, a caregiver may say their child can put on their own shoes, but perhaps that only happens when they receive a stream of cues. “Caregivers may be giving a lot of help through step-by-step directions without even realizing it,” indicates Whalen.

In other cases, a child’s behaviors and actions may compensate in a way that makes it easy to overlook a missed milestone. Hughes shares that when her daughter was younger, her autism went undiagnosed because she was so adept at interacting with adults that no one picked up on the fact that she wasn’t communicating with other young children.

In these instances, the extensive experience of professionals is necessary to help identify easily overlooked areas where a child may benefit from intervention.

Building Block 3: Prioritizing a play-based environment

Child psychologist Jean Piaget said that “play is the work of children.” This observation underscores the idea that play and learning are synonymous at this stage.

Creating a play-based environment is also the best way to help children transition positively from the home setting to the learning environment. “In a group setting, the play journey includes practicing interaction with peers and learning to share, compromise and make rules,” says Hughes.

Many early childhood educators have found that the social restrictions of the pandemic dealt a significant setback to the emergence of social-emotional skills, such as empathy, cooperation and self-regulation, given that peer interaction was limited during this pivotal developmental window. Thus, educators may need to provide additional support through modeling social behaviors,

facilitating interaction and teaching some of the principles associated with social-emotional learning (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning’s broadly accepted “**CASEL wheel**” depicts how school-family-community partnerships are vital in establishing these crucial skills.

“Educators have often had explicit training on how to incorporate these concepts in an age-appropriate way and can be a wonderful resource to share ideas with caregivers,” says Woodward. For example, they could talk about how simple household chores showcase responsibility and community contribution or use picture books as a launch pad to delve into a character’s reaction to a certain situation. They can also demonstrate how cards or symbols allow non-verbal children to communicate through special vocabularies that provide them the agency to express themselves in a developmentally appropriate way.

“Attention is the gateway to learning, and a child’s attention is going to be best captured by playing. Watching a child play can help you see how they are meeting various milestones, such as how they process information, problem solve and use language, as well as how their motor skills are progressing as they move about and manipulate objects.”

Becky Whalen, CCC-SLP (speech-language pathologist) and assessment consultant for Pearson

Building Block 4: Encouraging routines as a catalyst for achieving milestones

Many early childhood educators embrace the power of routines in their quest for a consistent classroom, and it's a tool that caregivers can implement to pave the way for a smoother home life.

In addition to helping children anticipate the day's activities, routines can help them reach the milestone of understanding a sequence of events. When provided with appropriate prompts, children can start to grasp the requisite steps in any routine. "Occupational therapists break down a task into its component parts through an activity analysis, which can help a child be successful," explains Hughes. "We recommend working with caregivers to identify ways they can help a child achieve small steps as they work toward a longer-term goal of independence."

For example, caregivers might consider getting ready for bed to be one routine. In reality, it entails multiple routines, from brushing teeth to putting on pajamas to

choosing a story. Providing charts or visual cues and offering choices about the order in which they tackle certain steps can provide a child some control over their life.

Routines also provide a sense of empowerment. "As an adult, I need a schedule to figure out the day's activities and what to anticipate and prepare for. Often children don't have sufficient context, and it's regulating and compassionate to preview the day, even providing a visual schedule for kids who might not have that language just yet," says Whalen. "I often see the most exciting transformation in kids who have regulatory difficulties when they are given a schedule, and it's a tactic caregivers can use at home, just like we do in school."

A predictable environment often staves off tantrums born of frustration, Woodward notes. "Helping give caregivers advice on how to institute a routine at home can work wonders."

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Shelley Hughes, OTR (registered occupational therapist) and director of portfolio management and delivery for Pearson





Building Block 5: Identifying and supporting developmental issues

Every child reaches milestones at a different rate, but there are instances where a delay needs to be addressed to ensure a child is set up for future success. In these cases, assessments are fundamental to determining the underlying cause of the delay and what additional supports would be appropriate.

Another key consideration: While some caregivers may already have sensed the need for intervention, others may be completely unaware of any potential concerns. Building a relationship from a place of empathy allows you to enlist them as advocates. “If you come on too strong in the way you share that their child is not meeting expected milestones, you might lose them entirely,” warns Whalen.

Instead, focus on the child’s strengths and explain how they will be an integral partner in working to achieve impactful goals. You want to initiate an open dialogue that aims to educate them and demystify the process, putting them at ease with the next steps.

Early childhood assessments often center around play-based activities, drawing on input from a multidisciplinary team that will evaluate the child more comprehensively. By watching and interacting with the child, the individual team members can gauge a child’s progress in a wide variety of behaviors and attributes, including cognition, communication, and social-emotional and physical development.

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Kathleen Woodward, Nationally Certified School Psychologist and regional manager, West U.S., Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean for Pearson

Districts have a responsibility to provide assessments and services to all students, as outlined in the **“Child Find” legislation**, which is part of the federal **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**. School districts are obligated to identify, locate and evaluate all resident children whom they suspect might have a disability or need special education services. Then, following an assessment, they must offer appropriate academic and behavioral supports.

“Districts must proactively and consistently educate communities about their rights,” emphasizes Woodward. “We need to provide those services to the student as early as possible and make sure they’re getting adequate access to resources they’re entitled to, including transportation and other wraparound services.” In addition, early childhood educators and allied professionals should become familiar with not only the federal regulations around developmental delays but also their state-specific guidelines, which can vary.



Embracing a shared responsibility for early childhood education success

It truly takes a village to optimize outcomes for every child.

Healthy development and education of our youngest students is a monumental undertaking too important to be tackled alone. When early childhood professionals and caregivers commit to sharing insights and expertise and reinforcing lessons at home and school, young children reap immense benefits. By establishing these respectful partnerships early, caregivers and educators can leverage each other's unique understanding and perspective to cultivate a healthy launch for the child's educational career. With the right building blocks assembled, the future is bright.

For more resources on supporting your youngest learners, visit [Pearson's Early Childhood Development Resource Center](#).





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