

Principles of Ideal Learning Environments

Drawing from developmental science and the strength of world-renowned approaches including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Friends Center for Children, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street College of Education, and Waldorf, these principles form the foundation of ideal learning environments for children from birth through age eight. These principles allow for multiple approaches and traditions, and take into account the varied contexts within which early educators and care providers work. Several essential beliefs weave throughout, including a commitment to play, relationship-based interactions, an ecologically-focused, child-centered perspective; equity; and a strength-based and inquiry-based approach with children, adults and families. Together, they balance principles of attachment and independence that are meaningful for young children's development.



Photo courtesy of AVANCE

This document is intended to enable educators and those who work with them to:

- Understand and see themselves in a vision of program quality (i.e., make the concept of “ideal” more identifiable for providers);
- Assess their alignment with ideal learning and consider how educator knowledge and practice could be supported by professional learning or other supports;
- Provide an anchor for educators to reflect on their work and make connections between where they are now and what they might aspire to do differently;
- Build a community that represents shared principles of quality early childhood education;
- Inform QRIS or other systems of oversight that define quality whether implicitly or explicitly; and,
- Influence policy decision-making that affects early childhood education providers.

The tool should be useful for:

- Early childhood educators and care providers in communities across the country;
- Those who work with and support early childhood educators and care providers; and,
- States, districts, and others who oversee early childhood educators and care providers.

What this is not:

- A valid, reliable, tested tool that can be used for rigorous evaluation purposes;
- A comprehensive look at every aspect of an early education setting (e.g., safety, policies);
- Inclusive of model-specific terminology;
- A comprehensive list of “look-fors”; or,
- Parent-facing.

Principles of Ideal Learning

The following principles draw from world-renowned early childhood approaches including Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Friends Center for Children, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street College of Education, and Waldorf and represent shared core concepts that form the foundation of ideal early learning.

Decision-making reflects a commitment to equity

- A guiding premise of work is that all children are not only entitled to an education that supports human flourishing, but that all children, regardless of background, have innate potential to thrive.
- Every child, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, or family income has access to the educational resources that they need to thrive.
- Resources are targeted based on individual children's needs and circumstances, which includes differentiated funding and supports.
- All children and families are valued as contributing members of the community.
- Administrators and teachers recognize the deeply disparate opportunities and outcomes that have existed and persist for children from low-income families, children of color, multilingual children, and children with disabilities.
- Educators are knowledgeable about the community in which they teach and respect family voice and agency to authentically inform decisions.
- Children's individual differences are celebrated as unique aspects of their identity.

Children construct knowledge from diverse experiences to make meaning of the world

- Children engage in ongoing exploration with their hands, minds, and bodies (such as hypothesizing, testing theories, solving problems).
- Children have opportunities to learn through observation and participation.
- Learning experiences reflect children's interests and are organized to encourage children to learn from and with each other about themselves and the world.
- Educators facilitate children's learning through the preparation of enriched learning environments – both indoors and out –and direct exploration and experimentation within those environments.
- Experiences reflect the context and community in which children live.
- Experiences integrate multiple domains of development (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and moral).
- Educators create opportunities for exploration and find ways to integrate them into everyday experiences.

Play is an essential element of young children's learning

- Play is a legitimate right of childhood, representing a crucial aspect of children's physical, intellectual, and social development.
- Children engage in multiple forms of play (e.g., solitary, parallel, social, cooperative, onlooker, fantasy, physical, and constructive) that support symbolic and imaginative thinking, peer relationships, language, physical development, and problem-solving skills.
- Educators help children develop mature play skills by providing background knowledge children can use in their pretend scenarios and by scaffolding peer interactions.
- Educators empower children to develop initiative by providing time, space, and materials for child-initiated play, appropriate risk-taking, and experiences that engender a sense of accomplishment.
- Outdoor learning is important whenever possible, allowing children space to run, jump, and engage in big body play.
- When outdoor play is not possible, educators incorporate large motor experiences in indoor spaces.

Instruction is personalized to acknowledge each child's development and abilities

- Educators understand where individual children are in their developmental trajectory and tailor their practices to each child's needs.
- Based on that knowledge, educators prepare learning environments designed explicitly to respond to the fundamental needs and tendencies of children.
- Educators ensure that experiences are in keeping with children's temperamental and developmental profiles, yet strive to stretch their capacities over time.
- Children's home language is valued and supported while educators facilitate English-language learning in keeping with parental goals.
- Educators are close observers of children and use observations to both interpret and project future experiences and opportunities with children and parents.
- Educators and other professionals work together to make schools and classrooms inclusive, allowing for individually different needs of children.
- Daily routines and curriculum reflect an understanding of how trauma might play out in an individual child's behaviors and needs.

The teacher is a guide, nurturing presence, and co-constructor of knowledge

- Educators have a strengths-based view of children and families, which enables them to partner with and guide them into new areas of learning and growth.
- Educators have deep knowledge of child development that is extended through the regular use of observation, documentation, and interpretation of children's behaviors and learning processes.
- Educators are researchers who use their observational knowledge to interpret, adjust, refine and redirect their approach.
- Educators are thoughtful and intentional about the decisions they make in the classroom, guided by a moral and ethical commitment to the common good of humanity.
- Relationships are reflective of authentic and honest engagement with community and families.

Young children and adults learn through relationships

- Educators foster a sense of community among children and adults in the classroom.
- Educators develop a relationship with each child that helps them feel seen and acknowledged.
- Educators, children, and families interact as partners and engender trust by building relationships.
- Children's relationships with each other are encouraged, valued, and actively supported.
- Children engage in small- and whole- group experiences.
- Educators engage regularly with families to support children's learning and use knowledge of family and community life to organize experiences and environments.
- Educators know the effects of adverse experiences (ACEs) on young children of different ages and how to respond in meaningful ways.



Photo courtesy of Bank Street College

The New Haven Children's Ideal Learning District (NH ChILD) is a joint community effort to ensure that every child experiences ideal early learning environments from birth to age 8.

Learn more at [NHchild.org](https://www.nhchild.org)

The environment is intentionally designed to facilitate children's exploration, independence, and interaction

- The physical environment is secure and well-organized to enable exploration independent of adult direction.
- The school and classrooms are designed as an enriched environment to be interacted with and upon by the children.
- Materials are organized, accessible, and engaging to children.
- Materials, spaces, and processes are intentionally chosen to support an emergent approach that reflects children's interests and questions.
- Children have access to a range of materials (sensory, expressive, musical, working tools, open-ended, recycled, natural, etc.).
- Environments are created to stimulate and encourage expressions of children's ideas, questions and emotions.
- Children interact with the natural world, including plants, animals and outdoor elements.

The time of childhood is valued

- An intentional, calm, responsive pace informs daily learning experiences, rhythms, and routines.
- Projections for curriculum aim to use unhurried time as a resource for learning, recognizing that children are born knowing how to learn and use time flexibly, repetitively, strategically, and in relation to new experiences and relationships.
- Continuity, rather than fragmentation, is a guiding principle for the adults' organization of time.
- Children are allowed time to fully engage with materials and each other.
- Daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms are incorporated into the classroom and provide predictability and security for children.



Photo taken at Breakthrough Montessori Public Charter School. Photographer, Katie Jett Walls.

Continuous learning environments support adult development

- Educators and administrators create, cultivate, and maintain an intentional, coherent, and shared educational philosophy that guides practice and is revisited routinely by all.
- All adults (e.g., educators, staff, administrators) engage in a continual cycle of observation and reflection with the goal of continual improvement.
- All adults take personal and group responsibility toward better understanding and conscious countering of systemic racism.
- Substantial and consistent time and space is set aside for regular professional reflection on practice.
- Coaching and supervision are both strengths-based and inquiry-based to encourage curiosity, build resources, and increase self-awareness.

Trust for Learning is a philanthropic partnership guided by the belief that every child has limitless potential and the right to thrive. We invest in the equitable expansion of ideal learning environments for underserved children across the United States.

Please learn more and join us at www.trustforlearning.org.



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