

A decorative graphic in the top-left corner consisting of concentric, overlapping semi-circles in yellow, orange, white, and blue, with a green triangle pointing upwards. A vertical line of purple dots runs down the right side of this graphic.

# SPARKING LEARNING *in* YOUNG CHILDREN

A vertical yellow bar on the left side of the page, with a horizontal line of purple dots crossing it.

Classroom Best Practices

Chris Amirault

A large, colorful rainbow graphic at the bottom of the page, composed of multiple overlapping semi-circular bands in blue, pink, green, purple, yellow, and orange.



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# Introduction

*Sparking Learning in Young Children* provides educators an overview of what they need to know to get started in a preschool or preK classroom. The following chapters introduce crucial topics in early childhood education (ECE). The insights here are drawn from recent research, best practices, and firsthand experience. And they're delivered with good humor and lively energy, so that you can spark learning not only in children, but also in yourself!

This book does not tell you which curriculum and assessments to use. And it is not a “how to teach” guide. Rather, it serves to set teachers up for success. Whether you're in your first year teaching young children or you're an experienced teacher, this book will guide, support, and encourage you so you can help all children in your classroom start their educational journeys with delight and confidence.

In this book, the terms *young children* and *preschoolers* both refer to children between the ages of three and five. (However, nearly everything here applies to working with all students under age five or six.) *Preschool* is the general term for programs for preschoolers, whether they take place in a district building or an early childhood education program. *PreK* refers to programs that serve three- and four-year-old children. Several states offer universal, publicly funded programs for four-year-old children. These programs are known by various names, including *transitional kindergarten (TK)*, *voluntary preKindergarten (VPK)*, and *preK*.

## Overview

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The first chapter focuses on **child development**, the critical foundation of the ECE field. The science of child development has grown significantly in the last several years. This knowledge helps us better understand the relationships between social expectations, culture and identity, brain and body development, and difficult experiences. Many of the basic insights you bring to your work will be affirmed. Others may be questioned or expanded. Exploring child development in depth is the foundation for everything else the book covers.

Chapter 2 is about **planning and reflection**. One key research insight is that children benefit from a very particular balance. They need set, expected routines and structure. But they also need free play, new materials and experiences, and emergent, responsive activities. That balancing act requires educators to learn how to work as a team to plan routine tasks, child experiences, and the flow of the day. To spark true learning, you need thoughtful, respectful planning and reflection in all you do. This mindset allows you to support children's development as individuals and as part of the classroom community. It also creates a more enjoyable, empowering professional experience for you!

Chapter 3 considers **room design and materials**. This chapter repeatedly asks the same two questions: Who is this object or material for? How is it used? Too often classrooms are designed for adults, with lots of commercial products and sensory noise. Overwhelming learning environments have little educational purpose—and they drain precious teacher funds! The chapter starts with the critical areas of safety and health. It then explores ways to find the sweet spot, with just enough engaging spaces and materials to spark learning throughout the day.

Chapter 4 focuses on creating powerful **curriculum, assessment, and instruction cycles**. Let's face it: sometimes curriculum can feel like an imposition, making instruction feel robotic. Assessment often seems like tedious paperwork. But our profession provides us with extraordinary opportunities. We are not required to follow a thick textbook, relentlessly covering all of the content. Instead, we get to focus on children and development. We determine what children know and can do, and we are part of the powerful moments that help them take their next steps. This chapter establishes simple and effective ways to approach these cycles. We can support everyone in the classroom, being accountable to both our program's administrative requirements and the ever-changing children we serve!

Chapter 5 dives into **family engagement**, tying the ideas from previous chapters into an overall approach for working with families. Parents and caregivers see and understand things about their children that they can share with you. This can help you create engaging environments for every child. At the same time, most ECE teachers are important members of their communities. They provide families with education and care for children. This chapter shares new research on family engagement and helps you build ongoing, meaningful relationships with families.

Throughout each chapter, you'll see text boxes that suggest additional resources to spark your learning. These are for you to use as you bring the topics in the book to life. You can explore a given topic in greater depth online, in print, or as part of a professional dialogue.



# The Ten Key Principles for Preschool Classroom Design

As an early childhood school director for the last two decades, I've learned that there is one thing that all strong educators share: they create classrooms and schools driven by clearly stated, deeply held principles that they return to over and over in every aspect of their work. These principles aren't window dressing. Rather, they are living, breathing mindsets that are important when establishing relationships, norms, and communities. And they are especially critical in challenging times, providing guidance when the path forward is less than clear.

So, here in *Sparking Learning in Young Children*, we'll do just that, using the following ten principles. (Feel free to edit these or to add your own!)

**1**

## **Remember: Education Is Care, and Care Is Education**

Our field has debated its name for decades, but one thing current research tells us over and over is that terrific early childhood education is grounded in an ethic of care. Outstanding care for children is the only way to provide them with the education that they deserve. The two go hand in hand!

**2**

## **Make Every Interaction Matter (Because Every Interaction Matters)**

Early childhood education is based on strong, consistent, nurturing relationships. These relationships are between children and teachers, between teachers and families, and between children themselves. Relationships are built one interaction at a time, so we strive to make every interaction matter. And when something goes awry, we reflect on that interaction to rebuild the relationship. Infant mental health professionals call this “the cycle of rupture and repair.”

**3**

### **Prioritize Honesty, Transparency, and Trust with Everyone**

It's not always easy to say the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! But in early childhood education, it's critical to practice honesty and transparency as much as possible. Our entire field is built on the expectations that parents trust us with their most precious family members and that children trust us as well. Honesty and transparency are the two communication essentials for building that trust.

**4**

### **Keep Your Equity Lens Handy**

Recognizing and honoring the diversity of each child, adult, family, and community member in your classroom is essential. It is the right thing to do all the time, not once in a while or at special events. This commitment is the only way to provide both outstanding educational experiences and truly responsive care. Being equitable means addressing inequalities that result in advantages for some and disadvantages for others. We now know that equity is essential for outstanding learning environments. We all have our biases and blind spots, so we must grab that equity lens regularly to explore situations—and ourselves.

**5**

### **Design and Plan for Every Child and Family**

This principle guides you to make decisions that balance group and individual needs. You'll need your equity lens in hand. At times, you'll prioritize a child with behavioral challenges or a family struggling with preschool routines. When you do, watch out for the misunderstanding that "it isn't fair." Remember that in early childhood (and probably in life!), everyone is working on something. Our classrooms are often the last chance children and families have to learn what they need for the K–12 world ahead!

6

### **Do Your Best with What You've Got**

At times, you may feel like your work is demanding too much of you. It may seem daunting to consider implementing all the ideas in this book. But let's face it: no one works in a perfect setting. We all have to deal with financial constraints, challenging situations, and imperfect humans (including ourselves!). So instead of jumping into the blame game, assess your resources, prioritize your strengths, and cut yourself some slack. Just do your best.

7

### **Celebrate Successes and Rethink Flops**

Establishing the right mindset for a great classroom environment is critical. Celebrate the many daily successes with the team, children, and families, and devote time to reflecting on the snafus. We'll never be perfect! But we can create a positive approach that elevates the good stuff and rethinks the not-so-good stuff.

8

### **Lead with Collaboration and Communication**

"You can't do it alone, but no one can do it for you." This well-known saying also applies to the early childhood classroom! No matter our role, we can lead by collaborating with other educators, with family members, and with the children themselves. That often requires asking lots of questions instead of pronouncing lots of opinions, and seeking out those who don't feel their voices matter.



9

### **Move from Compliance to Ownership**

Let's face it: even though we work in the most important profession on the planet, it often feels like we don't get a whole lot of respect. That attitude can make the expectations of our profession feel burdensome. We have to think of district mandates, corporate requirements, quality rating systems, state licensing, and more. When these demands feel like a burden, try hard to move from compliance to ownership. Find ways to make those expectations meaningful for the children and families you serve, as well as your colleagues. This won't make the challenges disappear, but learning how to make them useful is an invaluable leadership skill.

10

### **When in Doubt, Take a Look from a Child's Perspective**

Finally, whenever things get difficult, take a moment to change your position—literally! Sit on a child's chair or on the floor. Look at the situation from the perspective of the children in your care. What do things look like at the three- to four-foot height? What might be happening in children's bodies and brains? Putting the child at the center of our situation often makes the difficult things less challenging and makes our responses to them more thoughtful and compassionate.

## **Your Story as a Professional Educator and Caregiver**

As you can see from this introduction, this book is nothing without you. It is utterly meaningless unless you can find a way to connect what you read here to your own journey as an educator and caregiver. So I urge you to take a moment (or more) for reflection before diving in.

Set down the book, pick up a pen and paper, and respond to this prompt:

*What expertise, knowledge, and insight can you bring to children, colleagues, and families as an early childhood professional right now? What expertise, knowledge, and insight would help you serve them better? What learning story do you want to tell about yourself on your journey to become the best educator and caregiver you can be?*

I share similar reflective questions at the end of each chapter to help you make the content become part of your own story.

After two decades in early childhood education—running programs, providing trainings, serving on state and national committees, teaching in higher education, and writing articles and books—I’ve learned that the best educators never reach the end of their learning journey. We just keep walking on our paths together, gathering sparks of inspiration as we go.

I hope that *Sparkling Learning in Young Children* will help you on that journey. I can’t wait!

