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The early years : a handbook for new early childhood progressive educators

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The Early Years:

A Handbook for New Early Childhood Progressive Educators

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Abstract

Best Year Ever: A Handbook for New Early Childhood Progressive Educators

By

Mallory Morris

Many new early childhood teachers begin their careers feeling inexperienced and unprepared. Besides the preparation that their teacher education program provided them, they also are working to gain personal in-classroom experience, a network of colleagues to turn to, and mentorship from veteran teachers. Some things cannot be learned from a book, from studying for an exam, or from writing a paper. In the following master's project, you will find research, advice, and suggestions that will continue to prepare progressive early childhood teachers for their first years in the classroom. These teachers will be able to find the information necessary to begin to lay the foundations for successful first years teaching, including suggestions on how to set up their classroom, how to create community within their classroom, and how to collaborate and communicate with families. They will also find suggestions for how to incorporate specific strategies for teaching to each child's strengths, such as using sign language, including animals, and incorporating movement activities like yoga into their daily schedule. These ideas will encourage them to think creatively to incorporate their own passions into their early childhood curricula in order to always consider what is best for each child, each family, and for themselves in their teaching career.

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Introduction

The first time I stepped into an early childhood classroom, I was intimidated and felt inexperienced and unprepared but was ready and excited for the challenges that would lead me to be the most responsive, effective, and compassionate teacher of young children that I could be. I have since come to realize how intimidating these first experiences in the classroom can be for many new teachers, no matter how much preparation their teacher education program provided them. My past few years in the classroom have given me many personal experiences within the classroom that have taught me more than I could ever have learned from a book. I have built relationships with my colleagues, my students, and with their families that have helped me to solidify my philosophy of education and maximize my strengths as a progressive early childhood teacher.

There are a few experiences and aspects of teaching young children that I have found the most important to my future as a high quality early childhood educator. These are the aspects of early childhood teacher education that I believe are the most useful for a new teacher to take with them, and the parts of teaching young children that stand the test of time; always valuable and always useful. Many of the theories, ideas, and suggestions in the following pages have been drawn from sources that were published many years ago, but I have included these ideas because they continue to be meaningful, relevant, and useful to early childhood teachers looking to teach the whole child, support all families, and build a portfolio of strategies for teaching all types of learners.

A new progressive early childhood teacher must have necessary knowledge and skills to begin to lay the foundations for successful first years in the classroom, including

how to set up their classroom, how to create community within their classroom, and how to collaborate and communicate with parents. It is also important for new progressive teachers to have the knowledge necessary to incorporate a number of specific strategies for teaching to each child's strengths, such as using sign language, including animals, and incorporating movement activities like yoga into their daily schedule.

I have included research, theories, ideas, and suggestions in each of these areas in the following pages with the intention that new progressive early childhood teachers will be able to take these ideas and use them to begin to build their own wealth of experiences and strategies for use in their classroom. These ideas will encourage teachers to think creatively to incorporate their own passions into their early childhood curricula in order to always consider what is best for each child, each parent, and for themselves in their teaching career.

Before the school year - Setting up the classroom

Why the physical classroom environment is important

It has increasingly become more apparent to researchers, administrators, and teachers that the early years are critical ones, that there are a number of viable educational approaches, that parents can become better teachers of their children, and that the classroom environment has powerful effects on children's learning (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977). A good children's space needs to have flexibility and character because "for children space is the terrain from which they learn, not a site they learn in. Bland or uniform space limits their learning...Potential for a collective sense of our place and a number of my places is important in children's programs" (Greenman, 1988, 70-71). Educators need to look to the home as an environmental model for early childhood educational settings. The setting should foster initiative and reward child-child relationships. There should be clear expectations, opportunities for children to experience themselves as part of a group, and opportunities for mobility and tactile sensory stimulation. There should be many opportunities for adult-child interactions, child-child interactions, and opportunities for exploration and hands-on learning (Greenman, 1988).

Many aspects of children's development are affected by the physical attributes of the classroom setting (room arrangement, aesthetic qualities, materials provided) including their social interactions, comfort level, stimulation, and learning readiness (Kemple, 2004). It has been proven that children with developmental delays benefit greatly from being "taught in small, structured groups with blocks of time for free play" (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977, p. 97). Research has shown that in the appropriate environment with the right stimulation, children demonstrate an accelerated rate of

development and retain their gains over time. After much research, renowned special education teacher Samuel Kirk “maintained that intervention in both home and school settings is essential to promote the optimal development” of developmentally delayed preschool children (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977, p. 97). Teachers should strive to create the optimal learning environment in their classroom and to work closely with parents to be informed and to guide home experiences as well.

The teacher must make important decisions about the manipulation of the physical attributes of the early childhood environment because they can have a powerful effect on children’s behaviors, movements, social interactions, and emerging competence. If the environment is carefully designed, it can decrease aggressive behaviors and increase interactions that include cooperating, sharing, and helping (Kemple, 2004). If the environment and overall program is able to build children’s sense of predictability, a feeling of acceptance, and a climate of adult responsiveness, it is able to attend to children’s most basic emotional needs (Kemple, 2004). If this emotional climate is positively emphasized as an essential, non-optional foundation for supporting children’s development of “interaction skills, the formation of friendships, and the realization of true social inclusion”, then children will be able to experience social-emotional and academic success within the classroom (Kemple, 2004, p. 30).

Young children need to feel as though they are taking ownership of the classroom environment so that they can feel safe, comfortable, and successful. In order to provide this, teachers need to make sure the physical classroom environment feels safe and comfortable, looks organized and appealing, and does not over stimulate or overwhelm young children. If the relationships, attitudes, feelings, and interactions inside the

classroom and between teachers, parents, and students are supportive and caring, children will feel safe, inspired, motivated, capable, and successful, which will lead to learning important and positive things. “But if those elements are not there, if they feel disrespected or neglected in school they’re learning from that too. But they’re not necessarily learning the curriculum you think you’re teaching them” (Dawson et al, 2004, p. 81). Creating and maintaining the right classroom environment for early childhood children will set the tone for their educational careers, and will help them to develop an appreciation and love for school and learning that should be the aim of all early childhood programs.

Factors that affect the classroom environment

There are many changing aspects of the classroom environment which all affect each other and the children spending their day in that environment. “The environment is more than the physical setting...[it is] how time is structured and roles assigned, expectations of behavior, and physical surroundings” (Greenman, 1988, 17-18). Things like the size, style, and setup of furniture, the variability of aesthetic materials for multiple sensory opportunities, the source of lighting, and the organization and labeling of materials within the classroom all have a powerful affect on young children’s behaviors and learning capabilities. Aspects such as schedule, flow of time, classroom responsibilities, and relationships among students, teachers, and parents are also important to consider.

Furniture: The furniture in a classroom can have an important affect on how students view the classroom, their comfort level, and how they move about the room. Furniture can have many different uses and should be fully accessible to young children. This

means that shelving should be low and open, tables and chairs should be child sized, and special furniture like sand, water, light, and other sensory tables should be clearly open or closed so children understand when they can be used. Where furniture is placed in the classroom is also an important aspect: “furniture placement can create highly visible area boundaries, and a sense of privacy and protection for work and play” (Kemple, 2004, p. 32)

Materials: The materials in a classroom, such as hard work tables and chairs, a soft meeting rug, draping window treatments, and cozy reading pillows all give children different types of sensory feedback. When it comes to aesthetics, teachers should create a comfortable, relaxed, and supportive physical environment in the classroom. They need to try different things and reflect on how children react; try working with the art or music teacher or parents to improve the aesthetics of the classroom. It is important to create softness, security, and comfort by using area rugs, pillows, textured fabrics, and soft wall hangings. Textures should be varied for different sensory opportunities. Teachers should consider using natural materials as often as possible and bringing nature into the classroom as “there a tremendous aesthetic and learning value in living things. Plants and flowers add aesthetic appeal to the setting. Because they are alive, they also add complexity and novelty” (Greenman, 1988, 66).

It can also be helpful to use calm quiet music during times that require a calm atmosphere and attempt to use sound absorbing materials in the room that can dull the harshness of noise for sensitive young ears. The sounds within a classroom can soothe or jar, or can help to focus or serve as a bridge from one activity to the next. “Making noise is a powerful experience for a child; not being able to is a heavy restriction” (Greenman,

1988, p. 66). The color of materials can also have a powerful affect on young children; cool colors have a calming effect whereas warm colors have a stimulating effect. The color of materials can also “tie spaces together or create boundaries” (Greenman, 1988, p. 65).

Lighting: Lighting can have a very strong affect on how young children behave and are able to focus and concentrate in the classroom. Harsh, fluorescent lights can overstimulate children and create negative behaviors in the classroom. Instead teachers should use low or natural light, or light interspersed throughout the room from various sources. They can also mix lighting styles to create variety in living and learning spaces. It is also important to note that “lighting can give space warmth and character and highlight specific areas and features” (Greenman, 1988, 65). When it comes to lighting, the early childhood classroom should feel more like the home, with different lighting sources in different areas of the room and comfortable, soft lighting that promotes calm, engaged learning.

Layout: Teachers should spend time before the school year to try out and choose a classroom arrangement that allows them to have the most student contact within the room’s restrictions. A flexible set up is best and using a theme when arranging the physical classroom can be helpful, especially when thinking about bulletin boards, decorative materials, and a welcome sign. Create different types of spaces within the classroom, including places or areas where quiet privacy can be found, since children often need “opportunities to retreat from social interaction [and over-stimulation] can be important chances to regroup, refuel, and then reenter the social world with renewed energy and resources” (Kemple, 2004, p. 34). Also include large group areas like a

meeting rug or circle time area as well as well-defined areas for different activities like art, math, science, table games, and more. Young children need to be able to easily see and understand what is acceptable and expected in different areas of the room.

Classroom organization: The organization of the classroom furniture and overall organization of materials and manipulatives is important for aesthetic appeal, ease of access, and developmental appropriateness for young children. New teachers should use their resources for ideas in how to organize their classroom materials, such as getting ideas from veteran teachers, visiting other classroom for new and different ideas, and continually practicing flexibility and openness to different methods and styles. When it comes to displays, arrangements, and materials, teachers should always ask themselves, “What purpose does this serve?”

Arrange tables or group areas to accommodate 4 to 6 students for individual or group activities and use a large meeting area for group discussions and activities. Teachers should consider using flexible seating arrangements to meet multiple needs. When it comes to wall displays, teachers should “strike a balance between displays in student work and putting up challenging questions, posters, maps, and displays” (Dawson et al, 2004, 29).

For labeling materials for storage or for use in the classroom, it’s a good idea to label everything necessary to stay organized, such as bins, boxes, and shelves. Teachers should use words and pictures on labels so children will be able to read them and will be slowly exposed to the letters that make up the words they hear. It is also a good idea to highlight first letters of words in a different color to promote awareness of first letters of words and the sounds they make.

Important focus areas/materials to include

The different areas of a classroom and the materials provided in those areas have a strong affect on the overall classroom environment and how it affects the children and teachers spending their day there. Materials children are expected and allowed to use should be readily accessible, usable, and easy to put away. “Too many options in the classroom can cause children to become overwhelmed and to flit from one option to another without becoming engaged” (Kemple, 2004, p. 40). Some of the best materials to provide to elicit social play are blocks, dishes, dolls, dramatic play materials; to elicit solitary or parallel play are art, books, puzzles, peg boards, and toy animals; and to provide sensory feedback are play dough, clay, sand, and water.

Teachers should arrange the “classroom into well defined interest areas that accommodate small groups” of 2 to 4 children and “provide more manageable and inviting opportunities for peer play” (Kemple, 2004, p. 32). Establish limits to the number of children that can play in an area at a time. Show this limit by the size of the area, the number of chairs or materials available, and signs to remind. Also use verbal reminders, some sort of physical delineation (a name clip on a center chart) and establish use of waiting lists, and turn-taking habits.

Different areas of the classroom should provide many opportunities for complex socio-dramatic play. Teachers might consider a changing theme in blocks and dramatic play areas such as school, kitchen, airport, train station, etc. so children have the opportunity to expand their play in various different settings. “The presence of a thoughtfully equipped block center and dramatic play center provides important contexts for social play” (Kemple, 2004, p. 33). This can be expanded into other areas, for

example the clay and play dough area can be a donut or pizza shop, the sand table can be a baking or construction site, and so on.

Ideas for centers that are open-ended and provide support for many different learners are as follows: a book nook or library area with comfortable, cozy seating; a listening center with headphones and audio books; a writing center with different types of utensils, grips, and lined paper; a math area with various manipulatives; a science center with elements from nature like rocks, shells, sea glass, and magnifying glasses; an art area with various drawing and painting materials, different kinds of paper, glue, and scissors; a fine motor center with puzzles, lacing cards, and beading strings; a playdough or clay area; a dramatic play center with costumes, props; a woodworking bench with tools and scraps of wood; an open space for creative group movement; a music area with instruments; a meeting area for group discussions and story reading; a cozy corner for quiet breaks; a nature center with plants, gardening tools, and supplies; a class pet or animal center with fish, snails, earthworms, or ant farm (Armstrong, 2009).

There are various ways to run activity centers or work time areas in the classroom. Students can choose an area to work in and switch when they are ready or teachers can assign the first area and rotate through centers or allow students to change after a set amount of time.

“Attention must be given to the selection of appropriate materials. Materials must be interesting to the child, hold his attention, and motivate him to engage in activities that will enable him to acquire the skills and content essential to his development” (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977, p. 111). It is important to be prepared to add to, change, and refresh the materials and supplies you are offering. Children need a rotation of materials such as

books, manipulatives, and art supplies to stay interested and engaged (Stone, 2001). It is a good idea to ask a veteran teacher about where supplies may be kept and for suggestions like where the nearest teacher supply store is in case it becomes necessary to visit it.

Dramatic play: The dramatic play area of an early childhood classroom is one of the most important places where social, emotional, and language growth occurs. Teachers should scaffold children's creative and imaginative abilities by choosing specific materials to help guide play. A "selection of materials that encourage complex and extended dramatic play" should be organized according to thematic units within the dramatic play area of the classroom. It is important for teachers to allow children plenty of large blocks of time to explore dramatic play themes in order to work out life questions, curiosities, and misconceptions. "Social pretend play puts special demands on young children's cognitive and language skills" which will have much more opportunity to develop in a well-organized dramatic play area of the classroom (Kemple, 2004, p. 42). Provide open-ended materials that can be used in creative play such as costumes and blocks. Also provide specific dramatic play items such as kitchen utensils, baby dolls, and construction tools.

Block area: Building with blocks provides one of the most valuable learning experiences available for young children. Block play stimulates learning in many domains of development including cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and language. In the block area, young children are developing concepts that will lead to later understanding and success in math and numbers. Experience working in the block area also helps young children develop spatial awareness, communication skills, self-confidence, and knowledge of size, shape, and one-to-one correspondence. The block

area should have a lot of open space to accommodate 2-4 children and their structures. It should also be free from excessive traffic, and could be placed near the dramatic play area as both areas encourage cooperative imaginative play. Blocks should be non-interlocking and be at least 2 inches by 2 inches. Accessories such as people, animals and transportation vehicles should also be available to expand play. Aside from large wooden, cardboard, or foam blocks, teachers should also consider offering other building and construction materials like Legos, Lincoln Logs, a train track set, and a marble run set.

Art area: The art area in an early childhood classroom is a year-round staple and should always contain a supply of the basic materials as well as a rotating supply of more novel items. At the beginning of the year, it is important with very young children to introduce art materials one thing at a time, modeling how they can be used in appropriate ways. Teachers should make these introductions to materials an open conversation where children can offer ideas for how materials can be used and have the opportunity to try them under the teacher's supervision. This is especially important with young children and materials like glue and scissors. Staples in the art area include paper, crayons, markers, and colored pencils. After students have had the opportunity to discuss the many ways they can be used, scissors, glue sticks, and many colored construction paper should be added for collage purposes. If scissors are not yet developmentally appropriate, children can tear paper for collages. Novel items that can be rotated through the art area are things like exotic marker and crayon colors, stamps and ink pads, fancy scissors that cut zigzags and other patterns, hole punchers, chalk, cray pas, and sponge dot markers. A good way to introduce shapes and how they make up the world is to

introduce circles cut in different sizes out of paper, a hole puncher, circle shaped stamps, circle shaped stickers and more to make the art area circle themed. The same can be done with triangles, squares, or other basic shapes.

Painting: The painting area should be open-ended and supportive to all needs and artistic styles. When commenting on paintings that students have created, teachers should provide children with knowledge of their process instead of knowledge of the product. For example, teachers should use nonjudgmental language about artwork and point out facts like “I noticed you used a lot of red”, or “You’re painting with quick, short strokes” instead of “It’s so beautiful”, or “You made a person”. When it comes to paint materials, the same red, yellow, and blue tempera paints will lose attraction after a while. Introduce new colors and talk about mixing colors as the year progresses. Add white and black when the children have mastered using and mixing primaries. Young children also benefit from different types of brushes, sponges, and application materials to help children explore the many ways they can apply paint to paper (Stone, 2001). Teacher should also offer different types of paint such as watercolor, roller paints, and finger paints to diversify experiences.

Table toys: A table toys area could be split into a number of areas if the classroom has the space, children need the distinction, or the teacher has a preference. But if preferred, activities like puzzles and games, and fine motor activities like stringing beads, lacing cards, buttons, and tweezers to sort multicolored pom poms or other small items, can all be lumped together in one area of the classroom and called ‘table toys’. Puzzles should be simple wooden picture puzzles or large floor puzzles that children could work together to complete. Games should be simple board games with goals that require teamwork,

collaboration, and discussion, as well as skills like counting groups of items, letter and sound recognition, matching, and patternmaking. Fine motor activities should encourage the use of the pincer fingers (thumb and first finger) and can range from large wooden bead stringing (or smaller beads once they have mastered this) to numbered lacing picture cards, to other creative fine motor activities.

Meeting area: The daily meeting area or group area of an early childhood classroom is very important as an area where children can come together as a group to do activities, solve problems, and listen to stories all together. There should be ample space for children to sit in a circle, as a group, in rows on the meeting rug, and for short movement breaks like songs, fingerplays, rhymes, and dances as well. Sometimes assigned seats may be necessary and differentiating seating requirements depending on the child is also important. Certain children are better able to sit and listen if they are allowed to sit in a chair at the edge of the rug, on a bench at the back of the rug, or in a spot near the front by the teacher. It is important for teachers to have an open mind about what will help children do their best learning. If a child needs a fidget toy, a cuddly stuffed animal, or a special seat to perform at their best in the school environment, then the teacher needs to be willing and able to offer these variations.

Children need an environment that is safe, predictable, and dependable. Teachers can accomplish this with a predictable daily schedule that is posted with pictures and sometimes words that can be “read” by even very young children. Around the meeting area, there should also be posted a rotating job chart, a calendar, an attendance chart, a weather chart, and a number of days in school chart. These are all parts of an interactive

group meeting time where children can work together, each with a job for the day, to find out what will be happening and what they can look forward to or prepare themselves for.

The meeting area is also the place where children and teachers come together to have group discussions, mini lessons, and story time. It is important for this to be a safe and comfortable space for children to share ideas, ask questions, and be themselves.

Writing center: While it may not be an interest immediately at the beginning of the year with young children, a writing center is a great way to get children interested in letters and writing them. Start by providing simple wide lined paper and fat pencils, as well as suggestions to children that they can write messages, letters, or notes to their friends and teachers. Let them know that if they aren't sure how to make certain letters or to spell certain words, that teachers are always available to help them write their words. It is also helpful to include laminated alphabet charts, a list of class names and common words they are interested in writing, various pencil grips, and different sized pencils and grips so students can explore what they like best.

Math area: Beginning math skills like number concept and awareness, knowledge of one-to-one correspondence, knowledge of shapes, and recognition and creation of patterns are all important concepts for young children to begin to become aware of. The math area should include manipulatives like pattern blocks, Cuisenaire rods, base ten blocks, peg boards, magna-tiles, snap cubes, star builders, and other manipulatives that allow children to explore math concepts in a personal and creative way. Teachers should provide support by asking open-ended questions, supplying thoughts and ideas, and modeling and encouraging proper exploration of materials.

Science area: It is necessary for young children to learn the importance of observation; looking at the whole picture, as well as looking closely. Offering natural materials like rocks, shells, sea glass, tree bark, leaves in fall, snow in winter, and flowers in spring, along with magnifying glasses and pencils and paper will encourage children to explore and observe the natural world. Teachers can also rotate in lifelike models of small creatures like bugs, insects, frogs, snakes, lizards, and more for children to practice their observation skills. This is also the place to set up simple experiments that children can observe and record, such as whether items sink or float, what happens when different materials are mixed, and more.

The classroom library: Teachers should set up a multicultural classroom library so students have access to quality literature and are exposed to diversity every day. This classroom library, book area, or reading nook should be comfortable, cozy and supply space and time for children to take a break, rest and read a book. This should be a space where teachers and young children can sit close to read a story, have a quiet discussion, and confirm positive caring relationships. The classroom library can include cozy pillows, soft toys, or stuffed animals so children have a place in the room to find comfort and quiet when they need it. Book should be visible, accessible, and shouldn't be too many out at a time so children don't feel overwhelmed and confused at the choice.

Picture Book Curriculum Themes: It is helpful in early childhood classrooms for the picture books that are available at any given time to follow a theme, or curriculum unit that is currently being studied. Ideas for these are endless and can include: First days of school, separation; Friends, Rules; Feelings; All About Me; Family, Community; Seasons, Weather; Transportation; Living Things, and many more.

Starting the year right: Building Community

The impact and importance of building classroom community

Community can be developed through social inclusion, collaborative activity, and shared decision making. It is clear how compassion and responsibility can transform classrooms into communities that work for everyone. Teachers need to provide strong leadership, clear expectations, and messages to children and their families about what they believe in, work toward, and how they want people to behave and care for each other (Stone, 2001). “The process of helping a classroom of individual children develop into a community of children who regard each other with growing respect, interest, and trust depends on the teacher or leader. When the goal is a classroom in which children come to know and care about each other and develop mutual regard and concern, the teacher purposefully leads children over time from the world of *me* to the world of *us*” (Stone, 2001, pp. 8-9).

An effective leader is able to clarify goals and rules while projecting friendliness, good faith, and optimism. They have wisdom, knowledge, and good decision making skills, as well as the ability to listen, reflect, and communicate clearly. An effective leader is also unambiguous, fair, and firm while practicing constant reflection by observing with the eyes and mind wide open. “Teachers have enormous influence on children’s behavior by speaking directly and honestly to them” (Stone, 2001, p. 42). Practice constantly modeling, with both words and actions what it should look like and feel like to treat each other with respect. Teachers should use communication that models reason and courtesy and create an environment of safety and order where children feel comfortable and secure. A responsive teacher will help children learn about each

other and their surroundings, will help to build mutual respect, regard, and camaraderie among children, and will widen children's perception of classmates and foster interrelatedness (Stone, 2001).

Instead of pointing out challenging behavior, a responsive teacher will vocally praise good behavior and children will follow the good example of their peers. Teacher should "acknowledge children's accomplishments. Express to children your pride and pleasure in how well they listen to and talk with each other, at how they learn to solve problems and work together" (Stone, 2001, p. 35). It is important to look for "teachable moments" to help children become more aware of each other and each other's needs; organize group activities that provide many of these moments. It is important to openly encourage and admire their ways of getting together.

In order for young children to build a feeling of classroom community, they need to begin building an understanding that they are part of a larger group, and that being cooperative and considerate of others' needs can benefit individual others, the entire group, and themselves (Kemple, 2004). If teachers are able to convey to students the attitude and expectation that all members of the classroom community have active responsibility for maintaining a climate of caring, cooperation, and belonging, a strong community can grow (Kemple, 2004). If teachers allow discussion during circle or meeting times for children to work through questions, disagreements, and problem solving, they will automatically encourage students to come together and build community as a group. It is also important to be open and communicative with families by sending regular notes home describing what is going on in class, and offering opportunities for parent involvement.

Attitudes and expressions of respect start with grownups and then trickle down to students. Teachers cannot expect children to respect them and each other if they don't first show them how to do this by respecting the students (Dawson et al, 2001, p. 38). "Respect for children means that you create safe, appropriate, interesting surroundings in which they are comfortable, unhurried and able to become engaged in a wonderful variety of things to do and learn" (Stone, 2001, p. 38). Stone asserts that children need adults to take their development seriously, accept their behavior, and praise their progress no matter how slow or uneven it seems to be. "The teacher's task is to value each child as is, observe closely, and try to respond to each child's personality, cultural heritage, and unique needs and capabilities – while at the same time attending to and engaging the whole class" (Stone, 2001, p. 23). This is time consuming and requires constant attentiveness but supports young children's social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development in a way that allows them to grow together and learn about each other as well as themselves.

The follow excerpt from *The new teacher book: Finding purpose, balance, and hope during your first years in the classroom* (2004) sums up the importance that building community in the classroom has on the well being and development of the children and teachers spending their time together:

"It cannot be said too often that the hours invested in developing your classroom community are the ones that pay off the most.

These activities and projects are the ones that give you the insights you need to connect with your students and build the trust necessary to explore deeper issues with them. Here is the place to

work at “leveling the playing field” in your classroom, to make students’ experiences with you safe and fair regardless of their cultural background or level of academic achievement. This is also where you can give them responsibility and the experience of learning the roles of friend, citizen, advocate, and leader” (Dawson et al, 2004, p. 85).

Class rules, class agreement

Children need an environment that is safe, predictable, and dependable. Accomplish this with a predictable daily schedule that is posted with pictures and sometimes words that can be “read” by even very young children. Teachers can also accomplish this by creating a few basic classroom rules. Make sure expectations are clear by creating classroom rules together as a group and word them positively. Teach what to do instead of what not to do. Write these rules on a poster board and have each child sign that they agree, then post it in the classroom so children can have a reminder of what they agreed on as a class. (Kemple, 2004). When creating class rules, guide children towards 1 or 2 most important rules and write them large on a poster board. Children can ‘sign’ that they will follow the rules by making a paint hand print and writing their name next to it. Teachers need to make sure that “time is allowed for the valued process of making collaborative decisions about rules and procedures that affect the quality of community life” and that these rules are created as a group using words such as: “Who can tell me what you think is needed to make our classroom a safe place to be?” (Kemple, 2004, p. 145; Dawson et al, 2004, p. 119).

Kemple claims that “in a safe and trustworthy environment, children are taught rules, routines, and reasons; are given encouragement and supported opportunities to comply with expectations; and are warned in advance of reasonable and meaningful consequences that will occur if they do not behave appropriately after a warning” (Kemple, 2004, p. 49). Teachers need to make sure that consequences make sense with whatever the broken rule was. Young children will not be able to understand that they are sitting out during outside time because they used unkind words with friends and this punishment will not encourage them to change their behavior.

To make sure teachers reach all students through their preferred learning style when creating classroom rules, write the rules with words, number them, include a picture or graphic next to each one, assign a body movement to rules, such as holding hands behind ears for using “listening ears”, assign an animal to each rule, such as “listening lizard”, or set the rules to a song. Similar to how having students participate in creating classroom rules helps to gain their support for the rules, asking their input in establishing effective cues for activities, rules, and transitions will also promote their support.

Community building tips and group activity ideas

Establish, encourage, and sustain community through things like cooperative learning activities, collaborative investigation of problems of genuine interest, circle times celebrating classroom culture, favorites, or rituals. Encourage shared responsibility of classroom care of beautification through classroom jobs. Hold facilitated conversations that utilize a group process such as voting, and collaborative decision making. Develop classroom rules and agreements through a collaborative process of idea

sharing and decision making. Make meaningful visual documentations of shared histories such as class books, memory walls, and calendar practices.

Doing group gardening, cooking, art, science projects, or any project children can come together to create a product they can show off are good ways to create community. Having planned and worked together, children love to share the bounty with others. For group activities where children have to take turns, use small groups so children can have more turns, and don't have to wait too long for a turn.

Using songs in the classroom can help to foster a feeling of community. They are good for smoothing transitions, introducing, or furthering a unit of study and for creating overall community. It is important to make sure to discuss the vocabulary and the set the context to the songs are understandable. A good idea is to keep a wall map and go over geographical connections to a song, such a origin, using the map. Dawson points out that, "the lyrical metaphors, rhythms, and stories in many songs motivate and educate students" (Dawson et al, 2004, p. 133).

The following are ideas for classroom group activities that will help to establish and maintain a sense of community in the classroom. Students will feel connected and cohesive as a group:

Community Time: Bring up discussions of important issues during "community time", a time when we can talk and work together to solve problems in the classroom.

Name Games: Name games are a must in creating community. Make name games a part of the meeting or circle time.

Personal Expression, Dance, and Movement: Invite family members to share their dances and tunes either from traditions or other countries. Do dances and movement

times as partners or groups, but never required. Allow children to express themselves as they wish.

Class Books: Create class memory albums/books. It is also possible to preserve group projects in pictures on group memory walls and bulletin boards. Include quotes from students about their favorite part of the project, or just what they remember.

Calendar: Calendar time can be used not only for teaching number sequences, the days of the week sequence, and patterning but can also be used to record children's experiences in the classroom on a daily basis. Included in the 'calendar helper' job, which children will rotate through, can be the job of creating a small drawing that represents the events in the classroom on that day (ex: a pizza on the day of the pizza party). Each day, the child's drawing can be affixed to the calendar, and at the end of the month the calendar squares can be cut apart and refashioned into a memory book in which children can write their memories of particular days. These books can be kept in the classroom library so children can browse to revisit their shared history.

Find the Letters: Use found letters to put together names. Have students look through old magazines and newspapers with large headline fonts and cut out the letters of their names. The letters can then be glued to a piece of paper and decorated to create signs for their cubbies, or spots at tables, etc. Students can help each other find letters, and will learn each other's names through the process.

Helping Hands: Create a 'helping hands' book. Have a group discussion about all the ways people can be helpful and what they can do in the class or in the community to be helpful. Each child will make a paint hand print and will dictate to a teacher what they do that is helpful. Put pages together into a book that can be stored in the class library.

Footprints: Make rubbings of the bottom of children's shoes and send them to children's friends or relatives who live in different places. Include a letter asking them to write on the back all the things children might see and do while visiting them. Sample letter below:

Dear Family and Friends,

Our class is going places! To help us learn about geography, we are sending crayon rubbings of our shoes to friends and relatives who live in other places. Please use the back of my shoe rubbing to write about things I might see and do on a visit with you. Then send the note back to me in the enclosed envelope so I can share it with my class. We look forward to learning about the adventures that await us in faraway places!

Thanks! (Hale, 2009, p. 56)

Important Relationships: Collaborating with parents

The impact and importance of a positive parent-teacher relationship

One of the most important relationships among the many relationships in a school community is the relationship between parents and the early childhood teacher. The parent-teacher relationship must be built on mutual respect and trust. In order for teachers to be more understanding of parents, and parents to be more supportive of teachers, they need to make sure their top priority is to consider the best interest of the child (Mariconda, 2003). “With both society and the family undergoing major changes, families and schools can no longer afford the dubious luxury of considering themselves ‘separate but equal’. Each needs the other in partnership” (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 77). When parents and teachers have a strong partnership, the student benefits from consistent adult support and assistance, at home and at school.

Because of the confirmed impact families have as educators of their children, “it is vital to work in partnership with parents and the community” (Rich, 1987, p 9). Children’s needs have been a major focus but what about the needs of parents? “Family support can best be realized when teachers pay attention not only to children but also to parents” (Rich, 1987, p 10). Because of changing cultures, values, conditions, and needs, different home-school approaches are necessary. Many children live in homes where both parents work or in single-parent homes where the parent’s availability to meet with teachers, help on a school field trip, or involve themselves in their children’s school life is limited. Teachers must strive to connect with parents in a way that is different from how they connect with children. Parents need teachers to give them reassurance and to talk to them as adults.

It has to become imperative that schools and parents join forces to ensure that all children are able to come to school ready to learn, and that schools provide the best possible environment for learning (Crawford Burns, 1993). Teachers and schools who keep parents informed and included on a regular basis are more likely to experience supportive and understanding attitudes from those parents and less likely to see parents jumping to negative conclusions (Mariconda, 2003).

Karnes & Zehrbach write that, “a strong parent involvement component is found in almost all programs of merit. A flexible, many-faceted approach to involving parents” in the daily classroom is essential (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977, p. 112). Careful planning is another characteristic of an exemplary program and requires the thoughtful reflection and careful observation by teachers, and establishment of long term goals (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977). “A positive approach characterizes exemplary programs, and this approach must extend...to everyone involved in the program, including parents. To help maintain positive attitudes, plans and procedures must be based on positively stated goals that are realistic, concrete, and understandable to parents and professionals alike” (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977, p. 110).

Rich says that parent involvement is beneficial because it increases “the academic achievement of students, improves the attitudes and performance of children in school, helps parents understand the work of the school, and builds school-community relationships in an ongoing problem-preventing way” (Rich, 1987, p 12). There have been several key factors in the way families behave that are related to student achievement. Students with high achievement records have parents with high expectations for them, who respond to and interact with them frequently, and who see

themselves as teachers of their children. “A 1994 US Department of Education report, “Strong Families, Strong Schools,” compiled three decades of research showing correlation between children’s learning and family involvement” (Decker et al, 1994, p. 2).

Research suggests that family involvement fosters positive attitudes toward school, more regular homework habits, and better knowledge of the family for the teacher (Rich, 1987). Parents want to know that their child is in a place with a caring adult that recognizes, appreciates, and affirms their unique abilities. Outside of the parents’ influence, a teacher’s influence is one of the most powerful relationships with an adult that a child will experience (Mariconda, 2003). The student-parent-teacher relationship “is critical to the well-being, self-esteem, social and academic growth of the child” (Mariconda, 2003, p. 7).

Decker supports this idea by asserting that “the research has become overwhelmingly clear: parent involvement—and that means all kinds of parents—improves student achievement” (Decker et al, 1994, p. 1). Both research and practice has proven again and again that parental involvement creates more successful students. It is common knowledge that the “family plays a critical role in helping a child learn to walk, talk, play and interact with others, as well as to develop beliefs, values, attitudes, and the social skills needed to function effectively in society” (Decker et al, 1994, p. 2). Teachers need to be aware of this and encourage students and parents to share these home beliefs, values, and attitudes with teachers and the school. To do this, one of the first things they need to do is establish clear lines of communication so that parents feel included in what’s going on in the classroom and feel part of the team.

The primary goal should be to get parents and educators working together to accomplish the common mission of academic success for their children. Accomplishing this demands collaboration among parents, members of the community, and educators. New patterns of scheduling and interaction, as well as a strong, enthusiastic leader, are necessary to support this. Community resources can and should be used to create partnerships and strengthen families. “The partnerships must be reciprocal—for teachers and administrators to support parents, parents must be willing to communicate with school personnel and commit to working with them” (Decker et al, 1994, p. 27). It is important for families to share values, goals, and priorities with the school, and vice versa, for children to develop self-esteem, autonomy, moral and ethical sensitivity to each other’s traditions, which creates intergenerational respect. It is also important to unite parents, teachers, and students to deal with problems, cope with losses, and take risks. (Decker et al, 1994).

Not only do students benefit from a strong parent-teacher partnership, but parents, teachers, the school, and the surrounding community benefit as well. “When school and family work together, a partnership of support for children develops...research has demonstrated consistently that parent involvement is one of the keys to success in school for children of all ages and types” (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 9). Children benefit in various ways from increased parent involvement, including but not limited to; improved student achievement, attendance, motivation, self-esteem, and behavior. Meaningful parent involvement has also been shown to improve parents’ self-esteem, respect for teachers and schools, and overall confidence to help their own children succeed in school (Crawford Burns, 1993). Positive outcomes of parent involvement and collaboration

include increased self confidence in parenting, understanding of school programs and of the teacher's job, improved attendance, awareness of the importance of school, and a shared responsibility for young people's education and future success. Teachers also benefit from parent involvement by gaining an understanding of family cultures, needs, goals, and capabilities. Teachers benefit by being able to share the responsibility of educating children with parents who are involved.

A number of misconceptions have served as barriers to better parent involvement in classrooms. These include teachers' attitudes about parents, parents' attitudes about teachers and schools, and cultural disconnects between homes and schools. It has been shown that "only through mutual respect, support, and interdependence can schools, parents, and communities create an environment that promotes learning for all children" (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 34). Successful home-school partnerships require at least 3 factors: committed leaderships, training for teachers and parents, and a variety of involvement options for parents. With successful collaboration, students can become successful learners at home and at school.

Roles parents and families can play

Parent involvement "is the practice of any activity that empowers parents and families to participate in the educational process either at home or in a program setting" (Rockwell et al, 1996, p. 6). Parents should be partners in joint decision making and can be active as program advisors, evaluators, developers and team administrators. This partnership builds slowly upon mutual respect and trust through active communication and support. Parents and educators work together for the well-being and developmental progress of the children. "When parents are interested and involved with their child's

program, they support the child's need for attention and provide motivation for future learning...all forms of parent involvement help a child, but the more roles parents can play in the program and the longer the involvement lasts, the more positive the effects will be" (Rockwell et al, 1996, p. 12).

Teachers need to promote an exchange of ideas and information between teachers and parents that will benefit the children. They should ensure opportunities and access for parents to observe and volunteer in classrooms, and include parents in decision making about their own children and in the program overall. Research has found that parents are motivated and receptive to new ideas and they are eager to learn skills that will lessen parenting frustrations (Rockwell et al, 1996). Children also respond positively when their parents are more involved in their education because they learn to recognize that their parents are an important part of their learning and are able to see their parents in different roles. They value education when they experience the connection between home and school, and their self-esteem improves because of shared learning experiences with parents. (Rockwell et al, 1996).

Supporters/Encouragers: Research has confirmed that the active involvement of the family reinforces and helps sustain the effect of school programs. The more comprehensive and longer lasting family involvement is, the more effective it will be. The most successful role parents can play is as 'tutors', which appeals to the "most basic motivation for involvement—the desire to help one's child do better in school" (Rich, 1987, 18).

Special Project Helpers: Ideas for creating a culture in the classroom that promotes family involvement include: featuring a family-of-the-week on the bulletin board with

pictures, information about the featured child like siblings, pets, likes and dislikes, a map of the home, traditions and more. Teachers could also implement a star-of-the-week where children go around the circle and say one nice thing about the featured child. The teacher can write these things down and send them home with the child, connecting parents to the special day for their child. Teachers can also have students make cards for a child who has been absent for more than 3 days. Send them to that child with another student or when they return to let them know they are appreciated and missed in school (Rich, 1987).

Active School Community Members: Help to provide and conduct parenting classes and family based learning activities. Parents, teachers, and students benefit from various types of volunteer activities available to parents. It is also beneficial to conduct parent meetings or coffees so parents can help each other learn to communicate with their children, and have a built in support system. Providing families with resources and support affects what happens to children before and after school, in the home, the neighborhood, and the community. Holding high expectations of success and encouraging positive attitudes toward education are ways to build strong learning environments at home, which has been proven to powerfully affect student achievement (Decker et al, 1994).

Teachers must help change the role of parents from outsiders (invited guests) to insiders (members of the team) by asking parents to join in the process of education by tutoring, monitoring lessons, accompanying field trips, planning activities, and governing schools. Teachers should remain professional while more and more frequently asking parents to become collaborators in the schooling process (Decker et al, 1994).

Classroom Volunteers: Inviting and encouraging parents to volunteer in and outside the classroom improves students' academic achievement attitudes, as well as having a positive effect on the parents and teachers (Decker et al, 1994). It has been found that by being involved with their children's school through volunteering, "parents developed better attitudes toward schools and school staff members, became more active in community affairs, and sought more education for themselves" (Decker et al, 1994, p. 32). Teachers also "devoted more time to teaching, were more likely to experiment, and developed approaches that were more student oriented" (Decker et al, 1994, p. 32).

Encourage parents to volunteer in their own child's classroom or another classroom, work in the library, tutor special needs children, make attendance phone calls, or share their expertise in enrichment programs.

Tips for Effective Communication

Teachers are constantly involved in a variety of complex communication situations, including with students, colleagues, and parents. Being able to communicate in a way that builds strong partnerships is critical to the success of students. Words are very powerful and it is important to listen well and choose words carefully.

Communicating effectively "reduces anxiety and stress, increases confidence, and allows you to say what you mean and mean what you say in a constructive, proactive way" (Mariconda, 2003, p. 5).

In order to successfully communicate with parents as adults, teachers can utilize Maslow's five "universal desires" which are recognition, affection, power, new experiences, and security. To support recognition, teachers can let parents know that they are important and significant educators of their children. To support affection, teachers

can show parents that they understand how difficult it is to be a parent today. To support power, teachers can make sure parents know that they and the school believe that every family has strengths and these strengths can be used to help everyone involved. To support new experiences, teachers can encourage parents to try new things at home and to experience the real thrill and joy of teaching and seeing their children learn. To support security, teachers can make sure parents know they are wanted and needed. They should share as much as they can about the school, and what's going on in their classroom to reduce insecurities (Rich, 1987).

Some major communication ground rules include telling parents exactly how you will communicate, establishing yourself as someone parents can trust, assuring parents that you will inform them immediately about any concerns you might have about their child, and making sure you don't feel pressured to make an important decision, evaluation, or assessment during a parent conference or conversation (Mariconda, 2003). Every communication with parents should provide information, be sensitive to individual circumstances, be objective, compassionate, and professional, and be undertaken with the ultimate goal of helping the student. Teachers should be defusing tension, calming anxiety, and dispelling confusion with objectivity, concern, understanding, and empathy (Mariconda, 2003).

Teachers should ask themselves a number of questions: When and for what purpose do you communicate with parents? What is the status of communication in your school community? How can teachers adjust their communication strategies based on the age of and demographic of their students? (Crawford Burns, 1993).

“Schools communicate with parents for many purposes, [including] to keep parents abreast of what’s happening at school, to report on children’s progress, to help parents do a better job of helping their children learn, to solicit parents’ support, to involve parents in collaborative decision making, and to help parents meet their basic responsibilities” (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 22). Parents need “social and emotional support for building self-esteem and for dealing with the demands of parenthood...information about schooling and child care issues, including latchkey child self-care concerns...actual involvement in their child’s education...[and] interaction with teachers and the school” (Rich, 1987, p 37).

Home involvement should extend the work of the school because parents’ and teachers’ roles for students are different and complementary. “The family is in the ideal position to prepare for, expand, and extend the work of the school” (Rich, 1987, 13). School-home communication should “be timely...provide for both personal and general messages...emphasize the positive...give parents the information they need...be clear, concise, and free of jargon” and provide information of children’s social, academic, emotional, and physical progress (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 29).

Develop and publicize a regular, reliable communication process, means of communication, and the specific types of info that should be communicated. If teachers are not sure what information parents find helpful, then they should ask. It is important and more successful for school-home communication to meet parents where they’re at with interests, needs and capabilities. This information can be discovered through a survey of parents, community members, and staff to discover the types of communication helpful to parents (Crawford Burns, 1993).

When schools and teachers promote an inviting atmosphere and provide more opportunities for informal communication, the potential for miscommunication greatly increases. Teachers and parents must always be aware of their communication and practice the appropriate attitudes and skills to help efforts to involve parents. Increase the potential for two way communication. Put school contact information on all communications and make sure parents are provided with a list of important numbers for speed dialing. Make sure parents are aware of times that teachers are available for telephone calls or conferences. Listen actively and reflectively during face-to-face communication and let parents know you hear and understand what they are saying. Use a variety of communication strategies so all parents have the opportunity to participate and communicate with their child's class and teacher. Effective family involvement should be based on a non-deficit view of families, which helps to provide learning strategies for use at home that reinforce education in school. Communication between parents and schools should be both written and face-to-face and should be provided in varying proportions to fit the need of the individual family. The more parent involvement there is in a program the most responsibility there is to initiate a positive rapport with parents because they will likely carry the attitude they develop throughout their child's educational career.

Modes of communication

Student Welcome Card: When teachers receive the next years' class list, they can begin drafting welcome cards to the students. These postcards can be made colorful and upbeat with a short personalized message. They should be sent at the beginning of the summer

vacation so students will begin to feel excited and welcomed to the upcoming school year in your classroom.

Back to School Phone call: Teachers should make it a priority to call each child's parents in the first few weeks of school with something positive to say about their child. Even for students who seem to be having a difficult transition back into school, it is important to share a particular anecdote or observation that illustrates a positive aspect of that child's experiences so far. This can be used as an opportunity to ask parents about their perception of their child's adjustment to the new year and to stress again that their child is enjoyable to have in class and to be in close touch throughout the year. Teachers should emphasize the importance of parent involvement, that they would like open lines of communication, and should remind parents that they can contact teachers with questions or concerns via email, a phone call, or by sending a note.

Beginning of the year questionnaire: Include questions that will elicit the most information about both the child and the parents. Examples are – What are your child's interests? What do you think is important for your child to learn this year? Is there anything I should know about your child that would make his or her experience especially positive in my classroom? Would you like to be involved in the classroom? How? (Mandell, 2003).

Parent Welcome Letter: Include a 'Getting to know your child' questionnaire that should be filled out and returned. This welcome letter is an opportunity before school even starts to build trust and reach out in a positive way to parents. (Sample letter, page 17) (Mariconda, 2003).

Parent & Student Welcome back Orientation: Since parents often drop by with their children during the few days before school starts that teachers use to prepare themselves and their classroom, plan a designated hour during this time as a parent and student welcome back orientation. This way, precious prep time isn't lost and parents don't feel like the first time meeting was preoccupied or rushed. This should be an informal tour of the classroom including a brief overview of the classroom, the daily schedule, and special activities or policies. Include the date and time of this event in your Parent Welcome Letter. Also consider planning another commitment immediately after this orientation so you have a polite reason to end on time and don't lose valuable preparation time to parents and students who hang around much longer (Mariconda, 2003).

Weekly newsletters: This is a great way to keep parents informed about the goings-on in your classroom. Make sure to include translations into the home language if necessary. Use this to thank parents for their involvement and assistance, and inform them of any new units, lessons, and class activities.

Suggestion box: Set up a year-round suggestion box for parents and/or students to put suggestions into. Stress that these can be anonymous if they would like, that you will do your best to consider every suggestion but that the school's policies will have the final say in whether suggestions can be implemented into your classroom. Always thank parents and students for their suggestions and explain why you chose to use or not use their suggestions.

Parent bookshelf: Even if teachers can only provide a few resources, it is a great idea to provide a bookshelf in the classroom dedicated to books or articles about the curriculum, child development, and relevant parenting books (Mandell, 2003).

Parent Discussion Groups: The involvement of parents in their child's life and education is paramount and strong parent involvement can be integral to the success of an educational program. Besides sending newsletters and communicating via email, consider organizing weekly parent discussion groups, or general parent meetings. (Karnes & Zehrbach, 1977).

Face-to-Face: "The most powerful communications take place face to face and voice to voice. Something as simple as a friendly conversation with the classroom teacher can go a long way toward building parent support" (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 32).

Communication Notebooks: School-home communication folders or notebooks are a great way for each child to carry messages and work back and forth daily or weekly.

Personal Relationships: "Visit families in their homes and in community settings. Make personal telephone calls. Schedule regular parent and parent-[student]-teacher conferences. Allow [students] to explain portfolios, journals, displays, and other work to parents. Send personal notes or letters and encourage parents to share information in the same way" (Crawford Burns, 1993, p. 33).

Parent-teacher conferences: It is a good idea to insist the student is present and involved, always begin with a positive statement, and use positive statements for personal qualities, negative statements only for student behavior. "One of the best ways to fulfill the adult need for information, for reassurance, and for practical advice" is through the parent-teacher conference (Rich, 1987, p. 50). It is important for both teachers and parents to plan ahead, to communicate appropriately during the conference and to follow up if necessary. Teachers can ask parents to come with questions they may have such as how they can help their child at home, what their child's strengths and weaknesses in the

classroom may be, how they get along with peers, and overall enjoy school. Make sure to focus on the purpose of the conference without bringing any previous experiences into the meeting. Follow up is vital so teachers should make sure parents know to contact them about how suggestions are going or if they have further questions and concerns.

Parents that are actively involved in their young child's education and development have more appropriate expectations of their children, are better able to perceive their child's developing abilities and skills, and treat teachers and administrators with greater respect and vice versa (Rockwell et al, 1996). Parents are better able to focus their parenting energies on activities that are developmentally appropriate and accomplishable within the daily routine when they know and understand their child's development. This actively engages parents in the child's learning process and increases support for this learning, which enhances their enjoyment and appreciation of the unique individual their child is becoming (Rockwell et al, 1996).

Teachers can gain a wealth of important information from their students' parents about their children. Parents can offer practical assistance, new and important insights about their children, and resources for the classroom (Rockwell et al, 1996).

In society today, parenting abilities, skills, and insights don't always come naturally or automatically with the birth of a child. As teachers and educators of young children, it is important to recognize and understand the formidable challenge that parenting is in our world today. It is also important for teachers to "become familiar with the customs of the various cultures represented in their classroom and develop some

working knowledge about their students' situations at home" so that they can better understand and serve their families (Rockwell et al, 1996, p. 59).

Throughout the year: Reaching all learners

The importance of teaching to multiple intelligences

Curriculum is everything that happens inside the classroom, beyond objectives and assessment, and beyond the daily lesson plans. “The goal then, of early education, is to ensure that children acquire the foundation of healthy development and learning necessary to achieve their potential in the future” (Hirsh, 2004, p. 4). The early childhood curriculum should not be focused on drilling facts and figures into a child’s head; “rather, it should allow the child to construct knowledge to reach their individual potential” (Hirsh, 2004, p. 4). All students should experience academic success and be acknowledged for their success. It is important to educate the whole child, boost confidence, and strengthen connections between teachers and students. Focusing on multiple intelligences helps teachers look for the positive over the negative. Educational theorist Howard Gardner defines “intelligence as the ability to solve problems, to make culturally relevant contributions to one’s community and to identify new challenges to pursue” (Campbell & Campbell, 1999, p. 4).

Howard Gardner outlines his Theory of Multiple Intelligences as a broader and more functional method of discovering people’s range of abilities than the traditional IQ test. He grouped human abilities into eight comprehensive categories or “intelligences”, allowing for the possibility that more or different types of intelligences may be defined in the future (Armstrong, 2009). The eight intelligences or learning modes that have been included so far are linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. The theory of Multiple Intelligences includes certain key points: Every person possesses all eight intelligences and has strengths and

weaknesses in each. With appropriate encouragement, enrichment, and instruction, each person is capable of developing each intelligence to an adequate level of competency.

The eight intelligences tend to work together in complex ways and should be viewed and taught as interacting with each other for success. There are many ways to be intelligent within each category and it is important to “emphasize the rich diversity of ways in which people show their gifts within intelligences as well as between intelligences” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 16).

Gardner defines the linguistic intelligence as “the capacity to use words effectively”, the logical-mathematical intelligence as “the capacity to use numbers effectively...and to reason well” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 6). These are the two traditional modes of learning that are valued in Western culture. Gardner also defines the spatial intelligence as “the ability to perceive the visual-spatial world accurately...This intelligence involves sensitivity to color, line, shape, form, space, and the relationship” between these elements (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7). The bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is defined as “using one’s whole body to express ideas and feelings...This intelligence includes specific physical skills such as coordination, balance, dexterity, strength, flexibility, and speed” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7). The musical intelligence is “the capacity to perceive...discriminate...transform...and express...musical forms” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7).

The interpersonal intelligence is “the ability to perceive and make distinctions in the moods, intentions, motivations, and feelings of other people” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7). The intrapersonal intelligence is “self-knowledge and the ability to act adaptively on the basis of that knowledge” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7). The intrapersonal intelligence also

includes “awareness of inner moods, intentions, motivations, temperaments, and desires; and the capacity for self-discipline, self-understanding, and self-esteem” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7). The naturalist has “expertise in the recognition and classification of the numerous species of an individual’s environment” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 7).

Often American education and society tends to put Western cultural values on a pedestal. Examples of this are the importance of logical thinking, and rationality. There is also a bias towards focusing on human abilities or approaches that are readily testable (Gardner, 2006). “If we can mobilize the spectrum of human abilities, not only will people feel better about themselves and more competent; it is even possible that they will also feel more engaged and better able to join the rest of the world community in working for the broader good” (Gardner, 2006, p. 24). Western culture traditionally values the linguistic and mathematical intelligences and children are often deemed successes or failures based on their skills in these areas. Often children who struggle in these “academic” areas simply need to learn in a less traditional way or through different intelligences. “Other intelligence strengths can be utilized to help children develop a competency in linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences” (Hirsh, 2004, p. 37).

The Theory of Multiple Intelligences “runs counter to the societal trend to try to find the one best way to do something. Multiple Intelligence opens things up and gives educators options” (Campbell & Campbell, 1999, p. 8). Curriculum can be transformed through arts-based instruction, multi-age classes, team teaching, or interdisciplinary programs.

Young children in the early years of life develop powerful theories and conceptions of how the world works without dependence on specific teaching, and

instead largely due to their own spontaneous interactions with the world and the people around them. It is therefore important to provide them with a rich and supportive environment to develop these capacities and outlooks through various different modes of thinking or intelligences. Young children tend to learn best when they are stimulated through many different learning access points. A teacher should include hands-on opportunities; opportunities to move, interact, reflect, and work together. Using pictures, words, numbers, drawings, music, and movement concurrently allows all students to access the information in the way that works best for them (Armstrong, 2009).

In order to reach all students at their level and through their preferred learning style using their strong intelligences, or perhaps helping them strengthen their weaker intelligences, a teacher should consider “continually shift[ing] her method of presentation from linguistic to spatial to musical and so on, often combining intelligences in creative ways” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 56). No one set of teaching strategies will work best for all students at all times. Teaching with the Multiple Intelligences theory in mind helps teachers to reach as many of their students as possible where they are at. Teachers should use a broad range of teaching strategies throughout the day so every student has a chance to access the learning at some point (Armstrong, 2009).

There are various teaching strategies that are more open-ended and tend to reach more students. Some of these include storytelling, journal writing, brainstorming, visualization, color cues throughout the classroom, body answers like hand-raising or a finger to the lips, using hands-on manipulatives, rhythms, rhymes, songs, raps, chants, peer sharing, cooperative groups, board games, choice time, personal connections, nature walks, plants and animals in the classroom, and eco-studies (Armstrong, 2009). To help

students connect to the real world, many educators have begun to recognize and teach the importance of teaching in an integrated, interdisciplinary way. Instructing in this way is often thematic in nature and weaves subjects and skills together that are found naturally in life and provide students with opportunities to practice life skills.

When students struggle with a certain concept or skill, teachers need to help them to access their strengths so their talents can be used strategically. When students learn that everyone is talented in some areas and weak in others, they develop better self-acceptance and learn to work with their strengths. “Strengths exist within everyone that all teachers can nurture and develop. [With] a positive and explicit belief in student intelligence, teaching practices change and, ultimately, so does student achievement” (Campbell & Campbell, 1999, p. 97).

Many people imagine a classroom as neat rows of desks facing the front of the room where a teacher stands at a board and lectures, but this is hardly the only or the best classroom environment. There are many changes that can be made that will benefit and serve the needs of every student. When using the Multiple Intelligence theory, “the traditional model of education that requires students to work alone and listen to an instructor has been replaced with dynamic, multimodal learning, and flexible groupings of students and adult experts” (Campbell & Campbell, 1999, p. 97). When considering students’ different learning needs or styles, teachers can organize the classroom so that different areas or centers in the room reach different kinds of learners, focus on different interests, or cater to various intelligences. Providing varied and dynamic centers around the classroom focused on certain areas of intelligence but also open to a wide range of learning potential allows students opportunities to engage in active learning.

Many educational theorists agree that education should be rooted in meaningful experiences, presented in relevant, meaningful ways, and should connect the child with their culture (Hirsh, 2004). When planning teacher-directed experiences in the classroom, teachers should remember that the activity “can present a developmentally appropriate skill, introduce or review a concept, extend *into* a play experience, or extend *from* a play experience. Regardless of the intention, the activity must be relevant to the child and presented in an appropriate way” (Hirsh, 2004, p. 151).

When Howard Gardner devised his theory of multiple intelligences, he recognized that “hereditary and environmental interactions both account for intelligence” (Hirsh, 2004, p. 31). Keeping the Multiple Intelligence theory in mind “can greatly affect students’ behavior in the classroom simply by creating an environment where individual needs are recognized and attended to throughout the school day. Students are less likely to be confused, frustrated, or stressed out in such an environment” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 120). Early childhood curriculum should focus on realizing potentials of the young children in the class. “Intelligence is a potential and reaching that potential is the driving force of the early childhood curriculum...Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences grasps and organizes the unlimited number of potentials that exist” (Hirsh, 2004, p. 7, 6).

The following pages will discuss how multiple intelligences can be integrated into the early childhood classroom through using sign language in the classroom, integrating animals into the classroom, and including movement activities such as yoga into the classroom. Using sign language and visual aids can help all children, especially those who prefer to learn through their visual and spatial intelligence. Animals can help

children with their naturalist intelligence, as well as their interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences by making them feel comfortable and giving them something nonhuman and non-judging to talk to and attach to. Movement, especially yoga in the classroom, helps children integrate their spatial and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences.

The effects of using sign language and visual aids on early learners

There are many differing opinions and philosophies on how early childhood education should be structured. Much research shows and many educational theorists believe that the youngest students learn their best through an integrated and experiential educational process. It is important to teach to the many different intelligences and learning styles. For this reason, sign language can be added and used in an early childhood classroom to create multifaceted lessons that help to build deeper and more meaningful connections for young students. There are many adaptable possibilities for subjects, themes, and lessons that can help teachers to integrate American Sign Language, Pidgin Sign English, or simple gestures into the early childhood classroom.

Using American Sign Language in the early childhood classroom as a teaching strategy can accelerate verbal communication, increase English vocabulary, attention abilities, visual discrimination, and spatial memory (Flora, 2007). This is helpful not only for students with hearing challenges but is also beneficial for students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and for typically developing students as well. Using sign language in the classroom can help to enhance early reading skills, such as comprehension, sight word recognition, phonemic awareness, and phonetic and spelling skills (Flora, 2007). It is also beneficial for students with excess energy, who like to use their hands, bodies, or faces for learning, and for kinesthetic learners. Adding sign

language to songs, rhymes, games, and art projects can also simply make them more fun and more memorable for young students.

American Sign Language is the third most commonly used language in the United States and has been used as a highly effective form of communication in the United States for almost 200 years (Lazorisak, 2004). Sadly, ASL has only been considered a true language since 1960 when William Stokoe published his book *Sign Language Structures*. Before then, the grammatical structure of the language was unrecognized and users of ASL were discriminated against and looked down upon. In recent decades, people who are deaf and hard of hearing have gained significant educational rights and sign language has become much more common in schools and communities.

Early childhood teachers should consult Carole Lazorisak and Dawn Donohue's *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Conversational Sign Language* to learn more about sign language and its background and use. For ideas on activities, games, songs, rhymes, etc. to use in the early childhood classroom, teachers should consult *Sign Language Fun in the Early Childhood Classroom* by Sherrill B. Flora. Many of the following activities and ideas have been adapted from these two books. Teachers should refer back to these books or to an online ASL dictionary for how to many specific signs. Both books have wonderful illustrations that make the signs easy to learn and to teach.

Sign language activities and ideas to use in the classroom

ASL Word Wall: Each time a new sign is introduced, add it to the sign language word wall. These can be used for reference and will help children practice and remember signs. Children will love watching the word wall fill up and seeing how much they are learning.

Signs for 'toilet' and 'wash': Teach the children that if they need to use to the restroom during the school day, they should raise their hand and make the sign for 'toilet' to get

permission. The sign for toilet is made by making the letter 'T' with the hand and then shaking it. This will be used often throughout the day and children will enjoy it as a way to ask to go to the bathroom. Brainstorm with children times when hands should be washed and teach them the sign for 'wash' when teaching them the washing methods. Remind them to wash their hands each time they ask to go to the bathroom.

The Magic Words Tea Party: Introduce the magic words; please, thank you, and sorry. To reinforce, use signs with words when speaking to students throughout the day. During snack time, have a tea party during which students should practice using their magic words.

Watch, Listen, Sing, and Share: Commonly used words by an early education teacher, these should be introduced and taught to the students but will likely be used more by the teacher. Use the sign for each along with speech throughout the day with students.

Come, Go, Stop: A version of Red Light/Green Light, this game should be played in a large room, gym, or playground. Children should stand in a line and the teacher will make the sign for either 'come', 'go', or 'stop'. They will walk either forward, backward, or stand still depending on the teacher's sign. The first to reach the teacher wins.

Freeze Dance: When the teacher signs the word 'dance', children dance. When the teacher signs the word 'stop', children freeze. This activity can be used with music, but children must pay attention to the teacher to know when to dance and stop.

Simon Signs: Just like Simon Says, the teacher should sign actions like 'Please sit', or 'Please jump' and the students will follow. If the teacher doesn't sign the word 'please' the students should not follow the direction.

Feelings and Emotions: Brainstorm feelings and emotions words with students. Make a poster and have children draw the emotions they list. Turn this into a “Today I feel...” feelings board where children will move their name to the emotion they are feeling each day. Read a popular storybook about feelings such as *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr or *The Pigeon has Feelings Too!* by Mo Willems. Use one or more of these books as jumping off points for learning signs about emotions such as ‘happy, sad, mad, funny, scared, sick, and tired.’

If You’re _____ and You Know It: To the tune of ‘If You’re Happy and You Know It’, have children translate the sign the teacher gives and sing the verse filling in the right emotion. Suggestions for emotions teacher could sign: happy, funny, sad, tired, sick, scared, and mad.

How do you feel? What’s wrong?: The signs for these phrases should be learned, practiced, and used by the teacher when asking these questions in the classroom.

Children should be able to recognize the question and respond appropriately but may not necessarily need to know how to sign the question.

Colors: Learning colors, the signs for them, and activities that go with recognizing colors is very good for young early childhood students. Read storybooks like *A Color of His Own* by Leo Lionni, *Mouse Paint* by Stoll Walsh, or *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss. Teach the signs for colors as they come up in the books. The teacher should then use the sign for different colors while speaking their names throughout the day.

Shaving Cream Colors: Early childhood students love exploring and discovering with shaving cream. Put shaving cream along with food coloring into plastic bags and seal tightly. Children can then squish the colors together to create new colors. Mix red and

blue to discover purple, yellow and red to discover orange, and blue and yellow to discover green. The shaving cream can also be used on tables or desks to draw, paint, or as a fun writing activity.

Colorful Clothespins: Also great for preschool aged children who are learning to sort and categorize, use colorfully painted clothespins and colorful socks to create a sorting game. The teacher can sign a color and the children can quickly hang a sock in that color with a clothespin of that color. There can also be a clothesline kept up in the classroom with pins and a basket of colored socks for children to practice matching their colors during free or choice time.

Pets: Children will love learning the signs for animals as a number of the signs require them to pretend to be an animal. Have children brainstorm different pet possibilities and teach the signs as certain pets come up. Possible pet suggestions from students could be: cat, dog, bird, fish, mouse, and rabbit. Read popular children's books with pet themes such as *Pet Show!* By Ezra Jack Keats and *Fish is Fish* by Leo Lionni. Use the sign for each pet name while reading and encourage students to practice as well. Have children each bring in a pet stuffed animal and have a classroom pet store during dramatic play time.

Old Macdonald Had a Farm: Have children brainstorm different farm animals. Possible suggestions could be: pig, cow, chicken, sheep, and horse. Teach signs for these animals and sing Old Macdonald Had a Farm. The teacher can make the sign for the animal that should be sung in the next verse and children can sing and sign for reinforcement as they learn.

Food/Eating: Signs for food, drink, and mealtimes are important to early childhood students. Signs for words like ‘hungry, eat, thirsty, drink, more, snack, water, and milk’ are important signs that students can learn to use on a daily basis. The teacher should teach and use the signs for these words throughout the day and students will pick up on them very quickly. Encourage students to use signs for these words as they speak them or even just the sign.

Family: Family is very important to early childhood students. Everyone loves talking about their loved ones, especially young children. Start by teaching the sign for family and talking about the different types of families. Be sure to include blended families, one-parent families, multi-generational families, extended families, foster families, adoptive families, etc. Go around the circle and discuss what makes each child’s family special. Read popular family themed children’s books such as *All Families are Different* by Sol Gordon and Vivien Cohen or *Are You My Mother?* By P.D. Eastman to reinforce signs for family words while reading.

Family Bulletin Board: Have children draw and color a picture of all the people in their family, or they can bring in pictures of their family members from home. Hold a discussion where each child’s family is discussed with the class, the picture labeled with each member’s name, and the sign for each member reviewed with the students. Then hang all children’s family pictures up for them to look at whenever needed.

Weather: Weather is a daily topic in early childhood classrooms. Students will love learning the different signs for different types of weather. Signs they should learn having to do with weather are ‘cloud, cold, hot, rain, snow, and sun’. Teach the signs for rain and snow and read popular children’s stories such as *The Mitten* by Jan Brett, *Little*

Cloud by Eric Carle, and *Rain* by Robert Kalan. The teacher should reinforce sign by using them when reading.

Cloud Spotting: Teach the sign for cloud and take students out on a warm but partially cloudy day to study the clouds. Have them lie on the grass and use their imaginations to see shapes in the clouds. Afterwards, return to the classroom and have children make their cloud formations with blue paper, cotton balls, and glue.

Daily Weather Reporter: As one of the daily rotating jobs that early childhood students have, the weather reporter can tell the rest of the class what they observe the weather to be like on a particular day. This should be recorded on a graph or chart and analyzed for noticings occasionally.

Numbers: Learning numbers is important and fun for young early childhood students, especially one through ten. Read popular storybooks about counting books such as *Anno's Counting Book* by Mitsumasa Anno or *My First Number Book* by DK Publishing and teach students the signs for numbers 1-10.

Clothespin Numbers: Label clothespins with numbers one through ten and make either a cardboard wheel with numbers around the edges or use a can with numbers around the top. The teacher should sign a number and students can find the clothespin that matches that number and pin it to the matching number on their wheel or can.

The Impacts and Benefits of Integrating Animals into the Classroom

More than two-thirds of America's households own a pet of some sort, but the impact these animals have on the people and especially the children in our country goes largely unnoticed and underappreciated. Companion animals are important to the social-emotional as well as cognitive development of both typically developing children and

children with special needs. “Research shows that children across ages find emotional comfort in their relationships with animals. They feel at ease talking to their pets about their fears, joys, frustrations, and every day events and activities. Children’s contact with pets is almost universally beneficial” (Meadan, Jegatheeson, 2010, p. 70). There are many ways that companion animals are beneficial to young children and many ways that teachers can integrate the presence of animals into their early childhood classrooms.

Human-animal interaction (HAI) refers to the mutual and dynamic relationships between people and animals and the ways in which these interactions may affect physical and psychological health and well-being. Animal assisted activities (AAA) involve animals in a recreational or educational situation, do not have specific treatment goals, and can be carried out without the direction of a professional. These are the type of human-animal interactions that teachers should focus on utilizing in the early childhood classroom as well as in homes, libraries, or hospitals.

While the field of research and empirical evidence on the benefits of HAI for children is somewhat lacking, “emerging evidence suggesting that the affordances of companion animals may stimulate a young child’s cognitive growth through curiosity and learning, while also providing a source of emotional support.” (Esposito et al, 2011, p. 206). Teachers and parents should work hard to expose young children to companion animals, especially those children with special needs such as autism spectrum disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, and emotional and social needs, as the cognitive and social-emotional benefits are far reaching and long lasting. The following examples and evidence of the benefits of HAI for children will support this point and help teachers, as

well as parents of young children, understand the need for children to interact with companion animals in the early childhood classroom and more.

The benefits of children's relationships with animals include providing emotional comfort, development of compassion and responsibility, promoting social interaction, enhancing self-esteem and awareness of feelings (own, and others), and enhancing social-emotional development (Meadan, Jegatheeson, 2010). Traditionally teachers hope the presence of classroom animals will help advance the curriculum, encourage student involvement, enhance understanding of responsibility, and teach humane treatment of animals (McArdle et al, 2010). Almost all children can benefit in some way from having access to companion animals within the early childhood classroom. If it is difficult for teachers to keep animals in the classroom long term, teachers can organize visits from therapy dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, and more. "The nurturing relationship between children and the animals they keep often provides a unique opportunity for growth and development of both species. Interactions with animals affect children's social growth and communication, and there is strong evidence that the mere presence of animals alters a child's attitude toward him- or herself and improves the ability to relate to others." (Renck Jalongo, 2004, p. 16).

Pet care programs for students with pervasive developmental disorders or autism spectrum disorder reduce or eliminate worry and fear of animals, increase confidence handling animals, improve receptive and expressive language development, and improve decision making, problem solving and social interactions with peers and adults (McArdle et al, 2010). Being able to interact in the classroom with animals helps to calm children with autism and is beneficial to their social and emotional development.

The presence of dogs has also improved the emotional stability in children with emotional disturbances by decreasing crisis behaviors, improving attitudes toward school, and teaching lessons in responsibility, respect, and empathy (McArdle et al, 2010). The calming effect of dogs on children helps to lower blood pressure, anxiety, and heart rate. In a study of the effect of dogs on children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), these children actually experienced a heightened blood pressure. Since stimulants are a common treatment for children with ADHD, the stimulating effect of dogs could be beneficial to these children (McArdle et al, 2010). Having a visiting dog come to the classroom once a week for an hour would increase the sense of community in the class, and provide an unbiased companion for children to talk to.

Trained dogs can also visit libraries or classrooms with specific programs that allow children who are struggling with reading skills to read to dogs. Reading to an adult has proven much more stressful to a child who is learning to read than when that child is reading to a dog. Reading to the dog provides incentive and promotes reading in a fun and nurturing way. It would be very exciting and beneficial if reading to dogs were part of the standard curriculum in American public schools.

Dog walking programs are also very beneficial for children with physical disabilities or for children who are overweight. “Movement and activity in children are essential to the typical development of many cognitive functions, such as sensation and perception, language, and some intellectual abilities. The ability to move about one’s environment affects children not only physically but emotionally, intellectually, and socially” (McArdle et al, 2010, p. 124).

How to include animals in the classroom: Themes and lesson ideas

When teachers are considering integrating animals into their classroom environments, there are many aspects they need to consider. Teachers should make sure they know what the school policies are when it comes to keeping animals in the classroom or having them visit the classroom. Teachers should understand that they will be the person responsible for the class companion animal and need to think about the cost of food and care, as well as who will take care of the animal or animals if necessary over weekends, breaks, and holidays. It is important for teachers to consider the grade level they are teaching when choosing an animal for their classroom and their objective in having that animal in their classroom. One of the most important things for teachers to consider is whether students have allergies or not, and making sure that both children and animals will be safe and healthy at all times.

Animals that are beneficial in the classroom for children to observe and interact with on a daily basis (in order of level of maintenance) are mealworms, earthworms, fish, snails, hermit crabs, caterpillars (butterflies), tadpoles (frogs), mice, gerbils, guinea pigs, and rabbits. Good animals to have come and visit the classroom on special occasions or regularly scheduled visits are trained dogs, cats, or birds. Young children should not be exposed to reptiles and amphibians that can carry salmonella. Iguanas make poor classroom pets because they are susceptible to disease and don't tolerate handling well. Hamsters are also not very suitable because they are nocturnal and should not be disturbed during the day and are also prone to nipping.

There are many ways that animals can be included in the curriculum in early childhood classrooms if teachers are creative, easy going, and flexible. Children can

research and read about animals, use animals as subjects of stories, make observations and inferences that will enhance science curriculum, study habitat and how animals communicate, and study the life cycle and death (Renck Jalongo, 2004). “Feeding, cleaning, handling, and making detailed observations of the animal all represent opportunities for learning.” (Renck Jalongo, 2004, p. 67). A teacher can use the “decision to acquire a classroom pet as a way to teach children about the democratic process. The children plan a pet campaign, participate in the voting process, and elect an animal” (Renck Jalongo, 2004, p. 71).

A long term study of the animals kept in the classroom can include observation, comparison, learning to care for the animals, and creating dioramas of each child’s focus pet’s habitat. Children can use classroom companion animals as subjects of stories, artwork, and as objective and nonjudgmental listening ears. Teachers can use mealworms, earthworms, caterpillars, tadpoles, and many other animals as a basis for teaching about the life cycle, animals’ place in the world, and physical transformations.

The benefits of human-animal interaction do not stop in the early childhood classroom. Learning about companion animals is a lifespan topic and one-time exposure would be vastly insufficient. “Animals merit a place in the curriculum across the grades. Children can develop knowledge, physical skills, higher order thinking skills, attitudes, and values” in different ways at each grade level (Renck Jalongo, 2004, p. 70). It is important for teachers to consider all aspects of using animals in their classrooms, both positive and negative. “The best results, both in terms of the immediate classroom situation and the long-term validation of classroom animals, will depend on using well-trained, seasoned, qualified animals” (McArdle et al, 2010, p. 137). Not all children are

lucky enough to have access to interaction with animals at home so “educators can play a special role in making companion animals available to children who might otherwise be deprived of such opportunities” (Renck Jalongo, 2004, p. 15). Being able to experience their education is essential for young children. “It is no longer sufficient to *tell* students about science; they need to *experience* it. Companion animals provide such experiences.” (Renck Jalongo, 2004, p. 68).

The importance of movement for young children

Children learn by acting in their environment and receive immense satisfaction from mastering physical skills with determination. Moving comes with challenges, success, repetition and joy for young children. “Movement is as natural and essential to young children’s lives as loving care, rest, and nutrition. Movement provides children with an outlet for expression, creativity and discovery. Through movement, children learn about themselves, their environment, and others” (Curtis, 1982, p. 1). It is the job of educators to reinforce and enhance the movement capabilities of children. In the process of developing their motor skills, children learn, discover, and create to solidify positive value for physical and mental health. Movement is valuable for enhancing academic learning, including for expanding problem solving abilities and enriching the learning experiences for children. The goal of movement in school should be to gain knowledge and control over how the body moves.

Research has found that the more senses that are activated during a learning experience, “the deeper the impression it makes and the longer it will be remembered” (Fauth, 1990, p. 160). Since 83% of knowledge is gained through sight alone, it is important for children to see and participate in their learning experiences. Children

remember 50% more if they *see* and *hear* at the same time and 90% if they add *doing* (Fauth, 1990). Child development specialists agree that motor learning experiences are beneficial for young children in that they help a child develop body awareness, a positive self-concept, and greatly influence a child's attitude toward him- or herself (Flinchum, 1975).

It is important for young children to be given many opportunities to engage in goal-directed movement as well as expressive movement in order to learn how to move appropriately in the environment, gain self-control, manage impulses, and move intentionally and safely through their space (Hirsh, 2004). "The ability to use one's body to express an emotion (as in a dance), to play a game (as in a sport), or to create a new product (as in devising an invention) is evidence of the cognitive powers of body usage" (Gardner, 2006, p. 6). Young children are still developing a sense of their body in space, body boundaries, and self-control. Providing opportunities for children to explore and develop these spatial awareness abilities is important to "provide a foundation for being able to move the body skillfully and purposefully in the environment" (Hirsh, 2004, p. 91). "The body can be used to express emotions, communicate moods, relay information, and express feelings. The body can also be used to create personalities, actions, animals, natural phenomena, and abstract concepts" (Hirsh, 2004, p. 77).

Motor patterns and specific skills naturally improve with encouragement and repeated performance, even with no formal instruction. Allowing young children many opportunities to practice moving their bodies in different ways will help them to naturally become more aware and comfortable with how their body moves (Flinchum, 1975). "The self-concept is greatly enhanced, for example, upon repeated successes in moving

along with increased knowledge of the body parts and what the body can do” (Flinchum, 1975, p. 53). Movement must be creative, challenging, and motivating for children.

“When children are made a part of the decision-making process, they know that the adult approves of their ideas. They then have a stake in making the ideas succeed, while they also have their self-concept bolstered...Behavior problems often disappear when children are creatively working on their own activities” (Curtis, 1982, p. 42). “Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activity, without group pressure, participation is a joy, and management is less of a burden” (Flinchum, 1975, p. 94).

“Children differ in the range of their abilities, strengths, and needs, but movement is central to the very existence of all” (Stinson, 1990, p. 1). Children with motor disabilities need the same things to develop their skills as typically developing children: “to be challenged, encouraged to try, reinforced for their successes, and involved in the decision-making process” (Curtis, 1982, p. 10). Children, especially the very young, need to be able to explore, experience, and express their learning through physical movement. Educators must “recognize that movement is a common thread through which the education of the total child may be fostered” and help children to learn to move with clarity, sensitivity, and expressiveness (Stinson, 1990, p. 1). For young children, movement is a major outlet for non-verbal communication, expression, and learning. Play and movement experiences should be varied to allow children to practice using large and small muscles and to practice manipulative and stability movement patterns effectively and efficiently. “Movement is the learning of young children. Through movement and play experiences young children learn about themselves and their world” (Stinson, 1990, p. 271).

Early childhood programs should include a variety of physical activities that will help children to develop large and fine motor skills, increase physical strength and agility, and gain self-confidence in using their bodies to try new physical accomplishments. The nature of young children's active learning requires an environment such as this for the most developmental benefit. "If we want children to be thinkers, problem solvers, and decision makers, we have to give them opportunities to think, to identify and solve problems, and to make decisions. While some things have to be learned by rote, most learning takes place when young children are actively engaged in play, experimenting and experiencing, and raising their own questions and finding answers" (Klein, 1990, p. 27).

Children should be allowed to be creative with their bodies, and offered opportunities to discover new ways of moving for themselves. Teachers can skillfully ask questions and guide children as they explore and investigate their environment. "In order for all young movers to be successful and to gain in self-confidence, the teaching method chosen must allow freedom and choice for the children" (Boucher, 1990, p. 118). The teacher's role in free exploration movement activities is to observe the children's movement, "ask questions which encourage young children to make new discoveries," and to offer praise and support that builds children's confidence (Boucher, 1990, p. 119). Children need to be provided with ample time each day for free play that is guide and facilitated by teachers who encourage children to explore and engage in challenging motor activities of their choice (Flinchum, 1975).

Children use movement to refine intellectual and physical skills, to learn to control their bodies, and to control and interact with their environment. They also need

to learn to use purposeful movement to achieve independence and to begin to feel confident and comfortable in their body. “The three important dimensions of movement are stability or balance, manipulation, and locomotion” (Riggs, 1990, p. 17). Balance movement activities help a child use both sides of the body simultaneously, individually, or alternatively “in an integrated manner, allowing him to develop the ability to sit and to lengthen his attention span” (Flinchum, 1975, p. 57). In order to be coordinated, children must be able to skillfully and freely move and interpret information coming from their surroundings. Teachers should make every effort “to provide a variety of coordinated movement experiences” (Flinchum, 1975, p. 56).

The opportunity to move and become comfortable with their bodies can be an important motivation for young children and can give them the chance to explore and achieve goals. Structured activities such as “games are an important way for children to develop autonomy and problem-solving ability, while becoming less egocentric. Given the opportunity to learn new games, children also learn new ways of cooperating with others in a group” (Curtis, 1982, p. 42). The teacher should facilitate children’s interaction, not dominate it. “The responsive teacher, sensitive not only to the children’s levels of motor development, but also to their interests and social and emotional needs, will find appropriate way to use and adapt” games and ideas that they intend to use (Curtis, 1982, p. xii).

One of the best movement activities that can be done in an early childhood classroom that helps young children to gain balance, manipulation, and locomotion, is the practice of yoga. Yoga can be made into a creative activity, a game, or a free exploration of movement. It can be practiced in the classroom individually, or in partners, small

groups, or even with the whole group working together. “Play and quality movement experience, provided through structured and unstructured activities, foster an active learning environment, a joy for moving, and a feeling of confidence in the young child’s life” (Stinson, 1990, p. 3). Yoga is an effective movement activity that can help children use play and movement to become physically strong, mentally alert, emotional secure, and socially aware.

The positive effects of yoga in the classroom

The many positive effects of yoga can be utilized by teachers of young children in the classroom to maintain calm, ease transitions, and provide the overall sensory feedback that young children need. “Movement is essential to learning and empowers the cognitive skills of a child...Through yoga, children are given opportunities to orient themselves in space, observe and imitate demonstrated poses, and to remember, practice, and repeat a sequence of poses” (Biddle, 2006, p. 18). This requires young children to concentrate, focus, follow directions, and problem solve, which are all essential abilities for school readiness. Yoga is an important and useful practice for young children because it focuses on mind, body, and breath awareness. Yoga is also good for young children because it is not competitive and instead encourages children to work at their own pace, learning that everyone has different strengths and challenges.

Yoga encourages relaxation and helps students become aware of their anxieties and tensions and how to release those tensions in order to become more receptive to learning opportunities (Biddle, 2006). Yoga is a form of relaxation exercise. “Through relaxation exercises, children can learn and experience how the mind and the body can

work together to relax. They can start to identify when they are feeling tense and gain tools to help themselves relax” (Biddle, 2006, p. 107).

The benefits of yoga for young children’s development are many and include benefits for cognitive development, social-emotional development, and physical development. Cognitively, yoga helps children learn to communicate their thoughts and feelings through use of their body and words. Social-emotionally, “yoga helps children let go of fear and negativity and learn to see the best in themselves and others” (Biddle, 2006, p. 19). Through yoga, children are able to turn apprehensiveness to courage, develop positive decision making skills, and find an outlet for energy, emotion, and expression. Yoga also helps children develop self-awareness and an awareness of others. Yoga also heightens self-esteem and self-confidence, improves the attitude, encourages creativity and risk-taking, and gives children a tool to channel impulses. Practicing yoga, children are able to learn to connect with each other, and learn how to work with each other as well as alone. They learn to share space, move within space, and respect each other’s space.

When teaching yoga to children, it is important to keep a number of things in mind. Teachers should remember to be receptive and attentive to children’s needs, moods, and experiences, and provide many opportunities for success to help children build self-confidence. Teachers need to remind children that yoga is not competitive and that everyone is working on something. Educational theorist Lev Vygotsky believed that children learn from experience and experimenting, two things they practice each time they move their bodies to participate in yoga in the classroom. Young children learn best through experiential play and interaction and will be more receptive to yoga if it is made

relevant to them through their interests, and if it is made dynamic and undemanding with added movement, sounds, and imagination (Biddle, 2006). When teaching yoga, it is helpful for teachers to use encouraging language, to promote collaboration and teamwork, and to allow sharing, questions, and discussion.

Yoga nourishes the mind, body, and spirit; improves health and ability to learn; and teaches children how to help themselves and others and how to express themselves. Yoga practices in the form of games, movement activities, and breathing for calm and relaxation exercises are a natural addition to the early childhood curriculum. Through yoga, children learn awareness both in mind and body and learn techniques to calm themselves and strengthen their bodies and spirits.

Yoga and other movement activities for use in the classroom

*Yoga activities are adapted from *Yoga for the preschool and kindergarten child: A resource for teachers, families, and other caregivers*, by Tabby Biddle (2006).

Alphabet Yoga: Using a set of alphabet cards with the letters on one side and a photo of a yoga pose that starts with the corresponding letter on the opposite side, bring the students into a large group or small group and show them a letter. Ask them to come into a yoga pose that begins with that letter. Give them a few moments before showing them the pose on the opposite side of the card.

Class Yoga Book: Have each child in the class choose one from a list of yoga poses that they would like to portray for a photo. Once taken, put all the photos together into a book and read it while students perform each pose as a group. Keep it on the classroom bookshelf for reference whenever students would like.

What's Happening: Pair children into partners. Have one child be the *poser* and the other be the *witness*. Have the poser come into a yoga pose and the witness ask, "What is happening?" The poser should then respond back with whatever they notice is happening in their body and the witness will repeat back to them their noticings. Switch roles. To close, have the children who would like to, share how they felt and what they noticed with the whole group.

Mirror Mirror: Everyone sings, "Mirror, Mirror is the name of the game, whatever *John* does we'll do the same." *John* will come into a yoga pose that he chooses and the rest of the group will mirror his image. After holding the pose for two breaths, move onto the next student in the circle and repeat the process.

The Tree: Split the class into three groups; one to be the *seeds* that turn into trees, one to be the *sun*, and one to be the *rain*. Those portraying the seeds should come into child's pose with their hands tucked under their forehead like tiny seeds planted in the ground. Have the group portraying the rain to move around the room bringing water to the seeds. The group portraying the sun should then do three slow sun breaths bringing light to the seeds so they can grow. The seeds should root their feet into the ground like trees and grow to reach their hands and fingertips up into the air like branches. Switch roles so everyone has a chance to be the seeds, rain, and suns.

Hold the Pose: Use a set of yoga flashcards. Hold a picture of a pose up and tell students they need to hold that pose for one breath. After they have mastered holding poses for one breath, challenge them to hold for longer (two breaths, three breaths, etc). Have a group discussion after the activity where children can talk about how their bodies felt, what they noticed, etc.

Mirror Me: First model the activity for the children and then set them up with partners. One partner is the *mover* and the other is the *mirror*. Invite the mover to start moving his or her head slowly and the mirror to copy or imitate what their partner does. Move on to different body parts by having the mover begin moving the arms, legs, hands, feet, etc and the mirror imitate each in turn. Eventually have the movers come into yoga poses of their choice and remind the mirrors of their job. After what seems like an appropriate time, have the students switch roles. To close, have all of the children become mirrors and imitate the teacher's movements, eventually moving into resting pose.

Pass the Pulse: Bring the class to sit up tall in a circle holding their neighbors' hands. Explain that the group will be pass a gentle hand squeeze all the way around the circle but that they have to listen closely so that they only pass the squeeze when it is their turn. Starting with the teacher, sing; "*Ms. Williams* is connected to *John*, and *John* is connected to *Jane...*" and so on around the circle. When a student hears that they are connected to the person next to them, they give a gentle squeeze to that child's hand, and the pulse continues around the circle. When the pulse gets back to the teacher, the whole group sings; "And we are all connected to each other." When finished, ask the children what they noticed about the game and what would happen if someone let go of their neighbor's hand.

I am Quiet, I am Calm: To use before rest, or to help the class relax sing the following words to the tune of *Frere Jacques*: "I am quiet, I am quiet. I am calm, I am calm. I am quiet, I am quiet. I am calm, I am calm." The first time through, sing in a regular voice, then sing in a whisper voice, and finally only mouth the words with no sound.

Yoga Tag: “One person is the *tagger* and the other children are the *runners*. In order to be safe from the tagger, a runner must come into a yoga pose of their choice for three breaths (no more, no less). A yoga pose acts as a *base* in the yoga tag game. The tagger may not ‘babysit’ someone who is in a pose. The tagger is free to tag anyone who is running or who is not in a yoga pose. When a child is tagged, he or she must pause, take two *sun breaths*, and then call out “I am the tagger!” to notify the other players of the change. He or she becomes the tagger and the game continues as before” (Biddle, 2006, p. 103).

Breath Awareness: Bring the class into a sitting circle and have the children gently massage their ears and their earlobes to open their ears for listening (model this). After a few moments, have the children place their hands on their knees, close their eyes or gently look to the floor, and begin listening to the sound of their breath. Ask three questions about their breath that they will answer silently to themselves and share later to the whole group if they would like: 1) Is your breath long or short? 2) Is it soft or loud? 3) What else do you notice about your breath? Tell the students to silently count to ten and open their eyes when they are ready.

Breath Control: Try different breathing techniques with the class to help release physical, mental, and emotional tensions, and to steady the body.

Volcano breath – Bring hands to heart in *Namaste*. Inhale through the nose while raising hands up above the head (with palms together), then let out a big exhale through the mouth with mouth open wide as the hands release apart and off to the sides.

Bunny breath – Inhale three short breaths through the nose, hold the breath and wiggle the nose like a bunny, and then let out one long breath through the mouth.

Lion breath – Sit up straight on the knees with hands on the thighs. Inhale one long deep breath through the nose and pounce forward on the exhale with mouth open wide and tongue sticking out.

Snake breath – Inhale one long deep breath through the nose, and exhale all the breath out through the mouth with an ‘ssssss’ sound.

Take 5: To help children calm their mind and body and ease transitions, have children slowly inhale through the nose to the count of 5 as they show their counting on their fingers. When they reach 5, have them slowly exhale through their nose as they count backwards from 5, showing their counting on their fingers.

Rainbow Relaxation: For relaxation and visualization, have children lie down on their back with legs a few inches apart, arms alongside the body with hands open and relaxed (savasana). “Close your eyes and melt your body into the floor. Inhale and exhale deeply. Slow down your breathing. Imagine that a rainstorm has just passed and the sun is now coming out. Imagine that you see a big rainbow above your head. See all of the colors of the rainbow, one by one. Now we are going to breathe in and bathe our body in each color, starting with red. Inhale red all the way down to your legs and hips. Then exhale. Inhale orange into your belly. Then exhale. Inhale yellow into your chest and around your heart. Then exhale. Inhale green into your throat. Then exhale. Inhale blue into the space between your two eyes. Then exhale. Inhale purple to the top of your head. Then exhale. Allow your body to bathe in the colors of the rainbow. The first time it can be hard to imagine all the colors, so let’s try it again. You may find that some colors are easier to imagine than others, or that some body parts are easier to breathe into than others. Let’s try again and see what you notice. (Repeat the previous exercise).

Now pick a favorite color for today and surround your whole body with it for a few moments. Breathe deeply. Slowly begin to wiggle your fingers and toes, stretch out your face, and give your body a big ‘yawn’, stretching out in all directions. Slowly wake up, fully refreshed from the colors and energy of the rainbow” (Biddle, 2006, p. 124).

Spaghetti Test: Demonstrate with a piece of cooked spaghetti and a piece of uncooked spaghetti, and tell children they should make their bodies like cooked spaghetti. Have students lie on their backs in savasana and go around the room performing the ‘spaghetti test’. Lift their limbs and gently rock them back and forth and place them back on the floor. If a child is having a hard time relaxing, tell them to make their bones heavy and drop them to the floor. If they still have difficulty, tell them that you will come back after they have had more time to cook. Put on quiet music and tell the children to stay in the pasta water for a few more minutes, then invite them to wiggle out of the pot and onto the plate into a seated position to finish.

Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences can be utilized in any classroom, but especially in the progressive early childhood classroom, to help teachers reach all learners. If teachers are able to consider the many different ways that children learn and experience their world, they are better able to think creatively and with an open mind when it comes to their planning, communication, and classroom organization. They will recognize a child’s need to calm themselves or to organize themselves to learn through movement, or will be able to meet a child’s need to learn visually and experientially through gestures, visual aids, and sign language. An open minded and responsive teacher will be able to recognize the bond that children have with animals and

how much they can teach and learn through the inclusion of animals in the classroom environment.

Conclusion: Ending the year right

The importance of providing closure at the end of the school year

Just like the beginning of the year is important for young children because it may be the first time they've met a new teacher, new friends, or a new classroom, the end of the school year is just as important because it could very well be the first time these young children have had to say goodbye to a teacher, to friends, or to the classroom they have spent the last year building memories and experiences within. Providing young early childhood children with the closure they need to end the school year on a positive note is an important aspect of the early childhood teacher's job.

There are many big feelings when it comes to change, especially when something like a young child's first school year comes to an end. It is difficult for a young child to understand why they need this closure and how to deal with the feelings that go along with this process. Children might feel worried or anxious about the year ending, or they may feel excited about the upcoming year, but often the realization that such changes are occurring don't set in until some time after the school year has ended (Piskitel, 2004). It is also difficult for young children to understand the concrete nature of the end of the school year and the permanent changes that are occurring.

A well-planned goodbye can help to ease the transition from one year to the next, from one teacher or classroom to the next, or even from one school to the next (Piskitel, 2004). Judy Osborne (1979) asserts that, "children need help learning how to say goodbye. They need parents and teachers to help them learn about the *process* of saying goodbye and the *feelings* associated with that process. Learning about and naming the feelings gives adults and children a powerful, yet simple, way to connect emotionally" (p.

29). Going through a ritual like a game, song, or activity that helps children understand that their school year is coming to end would be important. It is also a good idea to do a class activity that will allow each child to take something home with them to remember their class and their teacher. Children need these supports to help them transition to their next year's class, as well as information about where they will be going next to help them feel comfortable and safe with the change.

Ideas for culminating activities or lessons

Young children need some guidance to connect their prior experiences to their future experiences. Providing a closing activity or a memento that children can take home with them at the end of their school year can help to give them closure for the ending year and excitement for the coming year.

Remember Me: Randomly pick names for a group conversation. Teachers should have students verbally share something they remember about the friend that they randomly picked. Go around the circle until everyone has had a turn (Dawson et al, 2004, p. 107).

Memory Book: Teachers can guide the class in working together to create a class memory book. The specifics can be decided by the class or teacher but each page should be photocopied and put together into a book for each child to take home after school has ended. Teachers might provide photos from the school year that children can work together or individually to caption. Children might each be provided a page to draw a favorite memory and dictate the description for the teacher. Or the teacher could write the words and children could each illustrate a page.

Portfolio: Teachers can collect artwork or other artifacts that students completed during the year and put them together into a portfolio to give to the students' families at the end

of the year. It is helpful to include documentation or descriptions of how each piece of work was made and what was learned.

A progressive early childhood teacher will never stop learning and will never be fully prepared for what may face them in the classroom each year. There will always be a new challenge, a new lesson, a new problem to solve. But with each of these experiences comes new knowledge and new ability to teach every child in the most effective and memorable way possible. My hope is that the research, ideas, and suggestions in the previous pages will help new progressive early childhood teachers to feel more confident when they step into their first classroom that they are prepared for the challenges to come.

They will creatively find new ways to set up and outfit their classrooms. They will work hard to build a community within their classroom for the better of every member. They will always do their best to collaborate with parents because parents are the first teachers of their children. And they will creatively incorporate sign language, animals, yoga, and many of their own passions into the daily routine of their classrooms. I feel as if I've come miles in my teaching confidence and ability in the past few years and look forward to the progress I will make in the many more to come.

My experiences in the graduate classroom, in the early childhood classroom, and outside of the classroom altogether have led me to the following concise Top Tips for new teachers. I have experienced laughter, joy, and the amazing revelations of children discovering learning in my classrooms because I followed these ideals.

Top Tips

1. **Plan:** Anything, everything, always be prepared.
2. **Be flexible:** Be open to change. Things don't have to go according to plan.
3. **Collaborate:** With teachers, administrators, parents, community members, students. Teach students to collaborate. This is the best skill they can take with them.
4. **Sing:** If all else fails, sing the words and the children will respond.
5. **Move:** Every chance, every opportunity. Encourage movement indoors, outdoors, structured or free.

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