

TYC

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TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN



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Message from Michelle



Dear colleagues,

As the mother of three boys, I know well that each child has unique strengths, abilities, and approaches to learning. I also deeply understand and appreciate the impact that caring, dedicated, and knowledgeable educators, like you, have on each child and family.

I learned this early in my parenting journey. When my oldest was a toddler, he displayed some unusual gifts related to word repetition. In preschool, his teacher noticed that he happily played beside other children, but he did not want to play with them. This experienced teacher shared observations that helped us better understand how to support our son. Based on a range of information, we learned more about him as an individual living with autism, and we were able to access services that have supported his development and learning since.

Considering individuality—the unique qualities of my son—was an essential part of this educator’s practice. It’s a core element of developmentally appropriate practice too. By getting to know each learner’s unique qualities, interests, and strengths, educators form the foundations for belonging and foster learning and development for every child in partnership with families.

We at NAEYC see and value your efforts to support each child’s strengths and qualities in your daily planning and teaching to create high-quality learning experiences and environments. I hope this issue of *TYC* both validates and offers new insights into your work as you engage in developmentally appropriate practice for all children and families.

In gratitude,

Michelle Kang
Chief Executive Officer

Message from the *TYC* Editorial Team

Each child brings strengths, interests, and prior experiences to their early learning setting. The early years are also a time when questions may arise and areas for individualized planning and supports may occur to help every child learn and develop to their fullest potential.

This issue of *Teaching Young Children* focuses on how preschool educators can learn about and be responsive to each child’s individual assets, personalities, approaches to learning, and needs. You’ll find articles about planning for individuality and about tapping families’ expertise as you do so. Learn how to use a suite of strategies to promote social and communication skills in children with autism spectrum disorder, and expand your knowledge about trauma-informed practices when working with refugee children and families. Gain insight into a family child care provider’s intentional, individualized approaches, and don’t miss the Message in a Backpack™ about asking questions at home.

Reflection Questions for This Issue

1. How do you get to know the unique characteristics and assets of each child in your setting?
2. What do you currently do to individualize your planning and teaching? What is one new idea that will help you support each learner?
3. This issue includes an article about science and literacy integration in preschool. How can you pair science and literacy to foster children’s learning in your setting?

NAEYC Calendar

Highlights	Get Involved	Learn More
EVENT Week of the Young Child™	Join us April 6–12 as we celebrate our youngest learners with a week full of fun and educational activities.	NAEYC.org/woyc
EVENT Professional Learning Institute	Meet us in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2–5! Connect with your colleagues for the professional development you’ve been waiting for!	NAEYC.org/institute

We encourage you to share your voice with us! Submit an article ([NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/tyc/writing](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/writing)), nominate yourself or a colleague to be a Feature Teacher ([NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/tyc/cover-teacher-nomination-form](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/cover-teacher-nomination-form)), or provide feedback to us about *TYC* (tyc@naeyc.org).

Feature Teacher

Rebecca (Becky) Tate

has been an educator for over two decades and currently teaches in a prekindergarten classroom at Amargosa Valley Elementary School in Amargosa Valley, Nevada.

Please tell us about the setting where you teach.

I teach 17 3- and 4-year-old children in a four-day, prekindergarten classroom. This year, two of the children have an individualized education program (IEP) focused on language. Like other school districts, we're lacking special education resources and staffing. We live in a small agricultural town, and the children are bussed in. It's a very long day for them, ending at 3:30 p.m., so I make our class engaging, playful, and comfortable.

What approaches do you use to build upon children's individual strengths, cultural backgrounds, and experiences?

I think about each child. Then I ask what in the curriculum and early learning standards will help me address their strengths, interests, and needs. I use a project-, play-based approach and make the learning about the children. I find materials that apply to their contexts and engage them, and I use these materials to make connections to our learning goals. If I don't know what motivates a child, I won't be able to support their growth. So I dig. Sometimes, I find a path that got closed off, and sometimes, I find one that hasn't been explored yet.

I try to meet each child's strengths and needs and the whole group's at the same time. I believe that what works for one child can work for others. We include a lot of movement throughout the day, like singing and dancing during circle time and going outside. One child can't spend more than 30 minutes outside each day for medical reasons, so we dance inside even more this year. Consistency helps children with and without disabilities. Between transitions, I give a verbal five-minute warning and use visual cues, such as a sand timer and a light that changes color. Even the youngest child says, "Five minutes, Miss Tate." He understands and has developed an expectation.

To learn more about Rebecca (Becky) Tate, continue reading online at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024).

Photograph: courtesy of Rebecca Tate

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Planning for Individuality in Preschool Spaces

Jessica Grimone-Hopkins and Christina Mirtes

Ms. Briana's preschool classroom is abuzz as children explore the room and engage in self-directed play. The room is organized into activity centers that are filled with a variety of materials to inspire them. Each child has their own unique interests, skill sets, and cultural experiences, which Ms. Briana takes into consideration when planning.

Today, her intentional planning efforts are on display: Harrison is playing with cars and blocks along with a few classmates, Maria, Tyson, and Khadija. Through previous observations, Ms. Briana has noticed that Harrison usually plays with the cars by himself. This week, she strategically placed a basket of cars in the block area, where other children play often. This small but impactful shift helps to support Harrison's socialization, communication, and cooperative play.

Children enter preschool with a variety of knowledge, experiences, and abilities. As part of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), early childhood educators are called to individualize their teaching strategies and curricula to meet these specific needs and contexts.

But what does this look like in practice? How do teachers intentionally plan learning experiences that build on children's individual strengths? Following, we (the authors) outline ways that educators can identify children's unique strengths and abilities, then offer examples of individualized lesson plans for different times and activities during the day. We base these practical planning recommendations on our past experiences—both of us worked in general and special education preschool settings for over 15 years and used similar planning tools. Currently, we are university professors working with pre- and in-service preschool teachers with whom we share these approaches.

Understanding Preschool Children’s Individuality

DAP calls for educators to develop learning experiences that reflect both what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular. To do this, teachers must understand each child’s abilities, characteristics, interests, and contexts. Observation and building relationships with families are key ways to do this.

Observing to Identify Strengths

Observation is crucial during the learning day. It provides educators with meaningful information that may not be shared by families or children, and it offers insights into children’s strengths and preferences. For example, when a preschool educator spends time observing children’s language skills across different content areas and learning activities, they can start identifying ways to build on each child’s strengths and to meet their needs: A child with strong communication skills may need additional opportunities to express their thoughts and ideas (such as creating and sharing stories, role-playing in the dramatic play area, or discussing their work and play in detail). A child who has difficulty communicating in certain modes may need supports, such as picture cards to share their wants and needs, time to practice gestures or signs, or opportunities to engage in back-and-forth exchanges with adults and other children.

When observing, educators can look for and record a variety of skills and characteristics. Some of these may be easier to identify (physical abilities, language, food preferences); some may be more difficult (feelings and emotions, thought processes, culture). Educators can gather vital information by carefully watching and listening each day, in different areas and at different times. To gather meaningful data, they can use a variety of formal and informal techniques, such as running records, anecdotal notes, checklists, and time and event sampling.

Building Relationships with Families

To build on each child’s assets, it’s crucial that educators connect with families. By building these relationships, teachers will gather insights into children’s individual qualities and interests and their home and cultural contexts. This information is key to recognizing each child’s unique strengths and to providing a safe, comfortable, and responsive learning environment.

Preschool educators can tap families’ expertise in a variety of ways to strengthen school-to-home and home-to-school connections. At the beginning of each year, for example, Ms.

Briana sends home a “Get to Know Me” page for families to share information. She also reaches out by phone or text to share positive observations about a child’s first week of school and to invite families’ initial questions and thoughts. Besides showing her genuine interest in building reciprocal relationships, these steps guide Ms. Briana as she sets up the learning environment and interacts with each child.

Throughout the school year, Ms. Briana continues to build relationships with families by sending home daily notes that include individualized examples of what their children did that day. She uses small, premade sheets with each center listed. She circles which centers the child participated in that day. The sheet also has blank spaces where Ms. Briana can record the day’s snack and the child’s favorite activity. She uses snack time to talk with each child and quickly fill out the form. These notes let families know that Ms. Briana checks in with their children individually each day.

Ms. Briana continues to make connections by email, text, and phone calls to share details about children’s learning and to help work through any issues if necessary. She uses family-educator conferences for more in-depth conversations, offering different days, times, and formats to accommodate families. She uses all of these points of contact to inform her intentional planning.



Planning for Individuality

As they gather information about each child, educators can begin individualizing their plans for learning experiences. Rather than focusing on a particular activity or routine, this individualization should encompass the entire learning day—self-directed and guided play, small- and large-group experiences, and routines and transitions. Following, we offer some examples of planning for individualization.

Small- and Large-Group Times

When children work in groups, they share their individuality and learn from their peers. Educators can scaffold small and large gatherings by planning activities that build on children’s interests and assets and that encourage them to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings as they work together. (Visit the online version of this article at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024) to see a sample plan for large groups.)

Sample Plan for Small-Group Time

Activity	Materials	Learning Objectives	Individualization
After reading a book on apple trees, children have questions about how apples grow. I plan a seed-planting activity.	Apples, small cups, dirt, digging tools, water pitcher, paper towels for spills	Children will practice fine motor skills by digging seeds out of apple cores; they will practice measuring and eye-hand coordination by spooning dirt into cups; they will make predictions about when the apple seeds will start to grow.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Max doesn’t like to get his hands sticky or dirty. I will help him use a spoon or other tool to dig out the apple seeds. › Patricio rarely speaks during small-group time. I will share the Spanish words for <i>apple</i>, <i>apple seeds</i>, <i>dirt</i>, and <i>water</i>, along with images of key vocabulary.

Self-Directed and Guided Play

Preschool settings should be intentionally created to nurture and support play and to address each child’s unique interests, strengths, and needs. Educators can do this by rotating a variety of materials and toys that children are interested in. These should represent different races, cultures, genders, family structures, and other aspects of identity.

Sample Plan for Self-Directed and Guided Play

Learning Center	Materials	Learning Objectives	Individualization
Blocks	After observing children’s interest in the block center, I provide a variety of blocks in different shapes, textures, and sizes; books about buildings; and photos of structures.	Children will work independently and with each other to create block structures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Cadence is developing her cooperative play skills. The variety of blocks will give her an abundance of materials to use and share. If needed, I will encourage her to work with a peer to build a structure. › Jacob is working on problem solving and becomes easily frustrated when his plan doesn’t immediately work. I will remind him that it’s okay if his first plan doesn’t work out. I will support him to problem solve.
Art	Children are interested in gift wrapping. To encourage this, I provide boxes, scissors, and adhesive.	With my guidance, children will demonstrate fine motor and measurement skills by wrapping boxes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Stacie is developing her fine motor skills. I will include adaptive scissors and use language to encourage her as she participates in the activity. › Aiesha likes the freedom to move around. I will give children the option to work at a table or on the floor.

Routines and Transitions

Routines (arrival, mealtime, transitions from one activity to another) are an integral part of preschool. During them, children practice many developmental and learning skills. For example, children work on social skills at snack time by waiting their turn; they practice their language and communication skills when they ask for a snack.

At the same time, routines can challenge children who are still developing specific skills. Educators can capitalize on these moments to individualize and scaffold instruction, tapping into children's strengths and addressing their individual areas for growth.

Sample Plan for Routines and Transitions

Routine and/or Transition	Learning Objectives	Individualization
Arrival time	Children will say good-bye to their families; hang up their coats and backpacks; and sign in for the day.	› Clara has difficulty finding her cubby. To help her and the other children, I will place children's pictures (or pictures of their families) inside their cubbies.
Mealtime	Children will wash their hands, then gather around the table for lunch.	› Sanjay often becomes upset when he has to transition to the bathroom for handwashing. I will cue him by referencing our visual classroom schedule during the activity leading up to mealtime. Once it's time for the children to wash their hands, I will sing a transition song to help Sanjay further. I will also put a visual sequence board in the bathroom that breaks down the handwashing steps to make them less overwhelming.

Conclusion

Planning for each and every child in an early learning program is an ongoing process that requires continuous commitment. By honoring each child's unique strengths and abilities, early childhood educators position individual children for success as they celebrate all of the children and families in their settings.

Jessica Grimone-Hopkins, PhD, is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Prior to working in higher education, Dr. Grimone-Hopkins spent more than 10 years teaching and supervising in public and private schools.

Christina Mirtes, PhD, is a tenured associate professor and the graduate program coordinator of early childhood education in the College of Education at Eastern Michigan University. She draws from her 20 years of classroom teaching experience working with children and families in pre-K-third grade inclusive early childhood environments.

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 1: Relationships

1A: Building Positive Relationships Between Educators and Families

Standard 3: Teaching

3E: Responding to Children's Interests and Needs

Standard 4: Assessment of Child Progress

4E: Communicating with Families and Involving Families in the Assessment Process



Individualizing Approaches Through Intentional Practice

A Family Educator's Experience

Elena Bacmeister, Dorothy Shapland Rodriguez, Margarita (Mar) Taylor, and Renae Cuevas Días

High-quality, home-based programs are one type of setting where educators can foster warm and positive relationships with children and effectively develop individualized approaches to address their strengths and needs. Mar (the third author) has been the director, owner, and educator of her home-based bilingual program in Colorado for 26 years. She worked with the coauthors to share how her intentional teaching supports each child's unique context and individuality.

In addition to the work she does in her setting, Mar has roots as a mentor and leader among Latino/a early childhood educators and in her community. She is also the director of an organization that supports Latina women's professional development. These roles have helped shape her practice as a socially and culturally responsive educator.

Mar cares for and teaches Black and Latino/a children who have different strengths and needs. She focuses on each child to identify their unique preferences, interests, and abilities. Every day, she intentionally strives to provide the children and families in her program a place to be seen, heard, and supported. Because she provides continuity of care, she builds positive, reciprocal partnerships with families to support children socially, culturally, and developmentally.

In this article, we share examples of Mar's intentional practices in her family child care setting, and we highlight how these approaches can be adapted by educators in other types of programs to foster an inclusive learning community.

Valuing Children’s Contexts and Partnering with Families

Research suggests that Latino/a families seek out a family child care setting for a few specific reasons. They choose it so that their children experience cultural consistency, and they seek relational trust with providers. Evidence also shows that when educators value the contexts in which children grow, they can make decisions responsively. Understanding children as individuals who are impacted and influenced by family, community, and culture is essential to high-quality early learning; it centers children’s strengths and responds to their social and cultural identities. (See “Acknowledging and Valuing Families’ Assets” on this page.)

These findings resonate with Mar’s partnerships with Latino/a families. She believes in each child’s capabilities and prioritizes building relationships with them and their families. She engages them in genuine conversations that serve as effective tools for individualizing instruction. Indeed, her goal is to support each child’s individual growth and learning with help from the families in her program.

Reflection and Professional Development: Learning from Families

Mar’s approach with families developed from deep reflection on past experiences. Early in her career, she found that she was too direct when discussing a child’s challenges. For example, she told a parent, in specific terms, about the delays she was seeing both physically and developmentally in their child, and she recommended testing by a specialist. However, not enough trust had been built between her and this family; as a result, communication broke down. Mar did a lot of repair work to re-establish this relationship.

Following this experience, Mar considered a different approach. She learned that an important step is laying a positive foundation from the start by acknowledging and celebrating a child’s strengths and contributions to the learning community. She also learned to observe each family’s style of communicating, such as whether they communicate directly or indirectly. These steps have helped her to effectively share information with families.

Mar has also learned the importance of including families in the process of observing their children and identifying needs and necessary supports. During initial conversations, she tells them, “I’ll share with you what I see. If something concerns me, I want you to know, so we can work on it together. Are you okay with that?” She tells the families in her program, “My job is to support your children in any way I can; we work together as a team.” Then, she invites them to observe

peer-to-peer interactions in her setting. She also regularly shares her own observations with families and inquires about whether they have seen something similar at home.

Acknowledging and Valuing Families’ Assets

Educators in different types of settings can build positive relationships with families by focusing on their assets, such as

- › **linguistic strengths:** vocabulary from languages spoken at home or an oral storytelling tradition
- › **experiences outside of learning settings:** community events and cultural traditions and activities
- › **family composition:** who lives at home and what children call their various family members
- › **interests and expertise:** the knowledge, skills, and experiences family members can share with the learning community (in the arts, cooking, construction, health care)

Observing and Responding to Each Child’s Interests, Strengths, and Needs

One of the most powerful tools in Mar’s teaching toolkit is observation. By closely watching and listening, she is able to intentionally individualize her practices.

Intentional Observations and Responses

Mar recalls a 3-year-old boy named Santi, who didn’t make eye contact and laughed to himself. “El niño empezaba a hacer cosas que yo no entendía.” (The little boy started doing things that I didn’t understand.) She spoke with his mom to learn what she was seeing, and the mom confirmed, “Yes. It’s different for him. I don’t know why.”

Mar researched to learn more about different abilities, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In addition, she drew from her own experiences and consulted with other educators; her brother, who was a doctor; and other knowledgeable members of her community. As a result of this process, she identified that the behaviors Santi exhibited could possibly point to ASD. However, while this research bolstered her knowledge, she did not seek to diagnose him. Instead, she used what she learned to sharpen her observations and to tailor her practices to support him better. She followed his lead by working with his strengths and

interests, which included sorting and stacking various objects, including blocks. Following, Mar recounts an example of how she scaffolded Santi's counting using blocks.

It started with me seeing how much time Santi would allow me to spend with him. Little by little, I guided him to sit down next to me. Then I found the thing he wanted to do. I asked, "Do you want to play with blocks? Okay! Let's play with blocks. How many do you want?"

Santi showed me he understood my question by counting, "One, two, three."

I said, "Okay, do you want one, two, three, four, or five?"

Santi held up five fingers.

"Five? Perfect!" However, I only gave him four blocks and told him, "You count them to make sure."

He counted, "One, two, three, four." Then looked at me.

I asked, "Are there just four, not five? Let's count them again."

Together, we touched each block, counting aloud.

"Oh! What did I do? Silly me, I forgot one!"

Then I handed him another block. "Here," I said. "Let's count them together." Then we counted the blocks again: "One, two, three, four, and five."

With her knowledge of Santi, Mar created a space for learning to happen. Educators in various settings point to barriers to individualized practice—specifically, a lack of time or a lack of supports—to learn about a child's particular needs and the necessary practices to individualize instruction. However, evidence suggests that other barriers may be at play, such as an educator's comfort with or skill in implementing individualized strategies. Mar's example suggests an avenue to address this: the more educators look for and focus on the specific behaviors and signals of an individual child, the less they need to develop mastery of everything there is to know about individualization or intervention.

In addition to what Mar does in her own setting, she partners with area organizations that provide a variety of developmental, cognitive, and physical services (screenings, resources, referrals) for children and adults. She also shares these resources with the families in her program. Her approach shows that what educators learn in the process of supporting one child can help them more effectively respond to the other children too.

Engaging a Child's Interests and Assets

Mar recalls another child, a 4-year-old African American boy named Jaden. Before he joined her program, Jaden had been asked to leave several learning settings. Mar was told by one of the directors, "Ese niño, no importa donde vaya; él es un troublemaker." (That little boy, it doesn't matter where he goes; he's a troublemaker). However, Mar didn't believe it. "Bring him here, and let's see," she said.

At first, Jaden wouldn't talk to Mar. He threw toys, wouldn't eat, and frequently exhibited other challenging behaviors. However, she understood that a sense of belonging and trust could enable his learning and growth, so she engaged with him often and observed his interests. She also paid attention to his eating and sleeping routines, knowing that establishing healthy routines is important for all children and can make a critical difference in behavior. (See "Questions to Assess a Child's Health and Well-Being" online at NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024.)

Over time, Mar found that Jaden had an interest in health, so she talked with him about his development, including how bodies need rest to grow and how good nutrition makes the brain stronger.

When I'd talk to Jaden about the brain, he'd say, "Nani, tell me more!" So I had to study it: I went to the library often and told him what I learned. I also shared books, materials, and activities with him about other health-related topics, such as a set of play teeth and a big toothbrush to talk about caring for our teeth. He wanted to know everything about how real things work. Esa era la llave. (That was the key.)

Research has shown the disproportionate toll preschool expulsions have on Black and Brown children, with rates at three times that of White children despite enrollment for children of color being proportionately lower overall. (For more on this topic, read "Black Boys Matter: Cultivating Their Identity, Agency, and Voice," by Brian L. Wright, in the February/March 2019 issue of *Teaching Young Children*.) This demonstrates a deeply troubling reality: erroneous and harmful attitudes about groups of people are often projected onto young children.

Mar works to welcome all children and build from their strengths before focusing on challenges. This allows her to dive deeper and to be led by their interests and assets. Educators in other settings can do the same by co-constructing topics of learning with a child. For example, if a child has a deep interest and/or strength in engaging with nature or natural objects, an educator can provide planting materials, encourage the child to tend to the

Responding to Each and Every Child in Your Setting

Mar's Approach	Steps You Can Take
Observe a child closely to learn about them across developmental domains and learning areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Watch a child as they play alone. › Watch them play with another child. › Note what a child is drawn to and how they interact with people and objects in their environment.
Be involved with others in the community to learn about cultural interests, needs, values, and priorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Shop at a grocery store or other business in the community where you teach. › Attend local events, such as public festivals, celebrations, and sports games. › Invite families and members of the community to share videos, photos, and/or stories about their homes and communities.
Learn what motivates a child, and encourage them to engage more deeply in that interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Along with your own observations, ask family members to share what their child likes to do and how they like to interact with others and the world around them. › Explore what family members might want to share with the learning community about their activities and expertise, and note when a child is particularly engaged and/or has many questions in order to plan future learning experiences. › Gather books from the library on various topics, and encourage children to look through them while you make note of what catches their attention and interest.
Provide a child with activities and structures to help them access new learning experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Encourage a child to pick up objects with different utensils and tools, including objects from their home and community contexts, to develop fine and gross motor skills and world knowledge. › Invite specialists to observe your setting and consider different equipment, including adaptive equipment, to increase accessibility and engagement.

plant, and support them in observing the plant's growth as a result of their care. Other children may become interested and take part as well, which can help the child experience the positive contributions they bring to their learning community.

Tú Dime Cuando (You Just Tell Me When)

Much can be learned by looking closely at the practices modeled by family child care educators like Mar. (See "Responding to Each and Every Child in Your Setting" on this page.) Taking a page from her book, teachers in other settings can seek to understand and support each child where they are and to build partnerships with families. As Mar tells the children in her program, "I'm not going anywhere. Together, we can do it. Tú dime cuando." (You just tell me when.)

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

Standard 1: Relationships
 1A: Building Positive Relationships Between Educators and Families

Standard 3: Teaching
 3E: Responding to Children's Interests and Needs
 3G: Using Instruction to Deepen Children's Understanding and Build Their Skills and Knowledge

Modeling, Prompting, and Reinforcement

Fostering Social and Communication Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Christan Coogle, Naomi L. Rahn, Kayla Lipscomb, Kristy Bennett, and Emma Cooley

Ms. Jessica is a lead teacher in an inclusive preschool class. Her class includes children with different strengths, interests, and abilities. One child, Eliza, is a creative 4-year-old. She enjoys playing in the block center, where she builds elaborate structures such as homes. Eliza also has autism spectrum disorder (ASD). One goal for her is to initiate social interactions with other children using verbal requests. Another child, Roger, is an active and agile 3-year-old. He enjoys outdoor play, including running, climbing up the outdoor structure, and sliding down the playground slide. Roger recently received a diagnosis of ASD, and one goal for him is to make requests using a voice output device (a device that can be programmed to produce words when a button is touched).

Ms. Jessica wonders how she can support Eliza and Roger as they work toward their goals to develop social and communication skills.

Ms. Jessica's scenario is not unique. Children in preschool settings have various social identities, interests, strengths, preferences, and approaches to learning. Within a framework of developmentally appropriate practice, early childhood educators "understand that each child reflects a complex

mosaic of knowledge and experiences that contributes to the considerable diversity among any group of young children.” As seen in the opening vignette, children with ASD have an array of strengths, interests, and learning goals. Research shows that children with ASD often experience a variety of challenges related to communication (like making requests and using expressive language) and socialization (like initiating and responding to greetings and reciprocal play).

Preschool educators can individualize instruction by providing learning opportunities throughout the day and within regularly occurring activities and routines, like child-led play, adult-led whole- and small-group activities, and mealtimes. After practicing new skills in these regularly occurring activities and routines, children are able to transfer them to other situations. Early childhood educators can use evidence-based strategies—such as modeling, prompting, and reinforcement—to support the individual needs of children with ASD. In this article we describe these strategies and illustrate how they can be used in combination to promote social and communication skills for children with ASD.

Modeling, Prompting, and Reinforcement Strategies

To support children with ASD toward their learning goals, teachers can use the following strategies:

- › **Modeling.** Children observe others performing a specific task in order to imitate and acquire a target skill. (See “Variations in Modeling” on this page for examples of ways to model target behaviors.)
- › **Prompting.** An educator provides a visual, verbal, or physical reminder for the child to engage in the target behavior.
- › **Reinforcement.** The educator follows up after the child engages in a desired behavior to help increase the likelihood that the behavior will be maintained. Some examples include providing an item when the child requests it; helping to engage the child in play, an interaction, or an activity when they request it; and giving specific, descriptive, positive feedback when a child uses a sign, gesture, or words.

Current research suggests that modeling, prompting, and reinforcement are most effective when used in combination. A discussion of how these strategies can support the development of social and communication skills follows.

Variations in Modeling

In addition to providing a verbal or physical model, there are other effective ways to model target skills. Video modeling and self-modeling are alternative techniques that help children with ASD acquire new skills or further develop skills.

- › Video models show others (like peers) performing a particular skill, such as requesting something or responding to a greeting.
- › Self-modeling is a variation of video modeling. A teacher prompts a child with ASD to perform a certain task, captures the behavior on video, and uses the video as the model.

These strategies should be individualized for the child with ASD and their specific learning goals.

Supporting Social Skills

During free play, Ms. Jessica walks with Eliza to the block center, where Jackson and Julio are constructing a road and parking garage.

Ms. Jessica says to Jackson and Julio, “Can I play too?”

The children respond, indicating that Ms. Jessica can join them.

Ms. Jessica says, “Your turn, Eliza. Say ‘can I play too?’”

Eliza says, “I play?” to Jackson and Julio.

They nod in agreement. Ms. Jessica gestures to Eliza to sit down with the children. She then helps Eliza engage in block play with them.

Through their social skills, children practice, apply, or generalize other learning targets. These skills, therefore, are critical to young children’s development. Social skills can be promoted through interactions among individuals or manipulation of the environment. Modeling, prompting, and reinforcement can be used to facilitate the social skills of children with ASD in a variety of ways. In the vignette above, Ms. Jessica intentionally chose a peer group she knew would be receptive and responsive to Eliza and an activity she knew Eliza enjoyed (block play). She modeled for Eliza how to join in play by asking the children, “Can I play too?” She then gave Eliza a verbal prompt (“Your turn, Eliza. Say ‘can I play too?’”). When Eliza approximated the request (“I play”), Ms. Jessica reinforced Eliza’s action by helping her engage in block play with the other children.

Supporting Communication Skills

Before the school day begins, Ms. Jessica programs Roger’s voice output device to contain choices available to Roger and his peers during self-directed (or free) play. During this time, she gives Roger his device containing pictures of the available activities. Roger’s eyes go to the LEGOs option. Ms. Jessica touches the LEGOs picture.

After waiting a moment, she points to the LEGOs picture and then says, “Your turn.”

Roger touches the LEGOs picture, and Ms. Jessica gives him the LEGOs.

Communication is the way in which a child expresses their overall intentions, informed by their needs, knowledge, and ideas. This area is important for language development and for interactions with peers and caregivers. Some children with ASD frequently communicate through spoken language while others do not. Modeling, prompting, and reinforcement

can enhance communication skills and avenues for children with ASD.

For example, in the vignette above, Ms. Jessica prepared to use these strategies to help Roger with his communication goals. She programmed his voice output device before the school day began and intentionally included choices that Roger enjoyed which she could also reinforce, including LEGOs, blocks, and cars. When she noticed Roger looking at the picture of LEGOs on his device, she modeled how to choose LEGOs by touching the picture. She then provided Roger with both a visual prompt (pointing to the LEGOs picture) and a verbal one (“Your turn”). After Roger touched the picture, Ms. Jessica reinforced his choice by giving him the LEGOs.

Modeling, prompting, and reinforcement can be used in a variety of learning experiences and parts of the preschool day. “Incorporating Modeling, Prompting, and Reinforcement into Preschool Activities and Routines” on this page includes examples of how Ms. Jessica scaffolded Eliza’s and Roger’s

Incorporating Modeling, Prompting, and Reinforcement into Preschool Activities and Routines

	To Support Eliza’s Social Goals		To Support Roger’s Communication Goals	
	During arrival	During mealtime	During arrival	During outdoor play
Modeling	Ms. Jessica sees a group of children gathering at the sign-in table. She models for Eliza, saying “my turn” to show her how to have a turn signing in.	Before lunch, Ms. Jessica reads Eliza a book that describes how to interact with others during mealtime. During lunch, Ms. Jessica models one of the actions shown in the book by asking, “I sit?”	Ms. Jessica prepares Roger’s voice output device with choices of marker colors that he can use to sign in at arrival time. She models how to make a choice using the voice output device.	Ms. Jessica provides Roger with his voice output device containing three different activities that Roger enjoys during outside play (going down the slide, climbing, and swinging). She models how to make a choice using the device.
Prompting	After waiting, Ms. Jessica prompts Eliza to say “my turn.”	Ms. Jessica prompts Eliza to ask if she can sit next to Jackson.	After waiting a few seconds, Ms. Jessica gives Roger a verbal prompt to use his device to select the orange, red, or blue marker to sign in.	As Roger enters the playground, Ms. Jessica gives him the device and prompts him, saying, “First choose, then play.”
Reinforcement	Once Eliza says “turn,” her peers give her the marker, so she can sign in.	When Eliza says “sit,” Jackson says, “Yes, sit with me,” and Eliza sits down for lunch.	Once Roger selects the orange marker, Ms. Jessica gives him the marker he chose and helps him sign in.	After Roger selects the swing, Ms. Jessica encourages Roger to go play on it.

social and communication skills during arrival, mealtime, and outdoor play through a combination of modeling, prompting, and reinforcement.

Conclusion

Incorporating evidence-based strategies into everyday activities and routines can help children progress in and reach their learning goals—within these targeted times and beyond. It is important to identify strategies that have evidence of effectiveness for children with ASD, as this is a rapidly increasing population of young learners who often need individualized instruction and supports as they learn and grow. Modeling, prompting, and reinforcement can be incorporated into existing early childhood routines to help promote social and communication skills for children with ASD. (See “Further Resources” at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024) for more on ASD and supporting social and communication skills development.)

As preschool educators think about individualizing practices for the learners in their settings, they can reflect on the following:

- › Which children in my setting would benefit from additional intentional strategies?
- › Could the strategies of modeling, prompting, and reinforcement support these learners?
- › What specific skills would help increase these learners’ engagement with peers during everyday activities and routines?
- › How might I intentionally use modeling, prompting, and reinforcement throughout the day?

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3G: Using Instruction to Deepen Children’s Understanding and Build Their Skills and Knowledge

Standard 4: Assessment of Child Progress

4C: Identifying Children’s Interests and Needs and Describing Children’s Progress



Preschool as a Safe and Affirming Place

A Trauma-Informed Perspective

Maggie Moore

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, 17.5 million children were refugees or seeking asylum worldwide at the end of 2022. Since August of that year, Chicago, a sanctuary city, has welcomed over 10,000 asylum-seeking migrants, primarily from Venezuela. Last fall, my school enrolled 24 preschool children who are asylum-seeking migrants.

Families may seek refuge for a number of reasons, including safety, political unrest, or economic instability. They may be considered *refugees*, *asylum seekers*, or *migrants*, depending on their legal status and their reasons for leaving their country of origin. (See “Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants” on page 17 for more about these terms.) They all may have experienced trauma and face a number of challenges in their new settings.

Life as a refugee is often unwelcoming or overwhelming. Families may face many stressors, such as securing jobs, housing, and consistent access to food and transportation; navigating differences in language and culture; and being separated from their extended families and communities. Children whose families are seeking asylum may have experienced a variety of traumatic events, or experiences that impact their emotional and/or physical well-being, such as violence, war, discrimination, and the loss of loved ones. They may have been injured or ill or lacked necessities like food and shelter. Children may have been separated from their families and communities, making them more vulnerable to trauma.

These newcomers are entering early learning programs and schools. We (as early childhood educators, staff, and administrators) must be ready to serve their social and emotional needs, which may take precedence over academics. While these children are curious and capable, their unique and complex experiences require us to support them using trauma-informed practices. This is part of both developmentally appropriate practice and advancing equity.

Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants

Refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants are all people who have left their countries of origin and crossed borders. While *refugee* and *migrant* are often used interchangeably, there is a legal difference between the terms.

- › **Refugees** are forced to flee their home countries due to war, violence, or persecution (for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group). They face threats to their lives and safety in their home countries. Refugees do not choose the country in which they are resettled. The United Nations Refugee Agency identifies the most vulnerable refugees and makes recommendations to select countries.
- › **Asylum seekers** (or **asylum-seeking migrants**) have left their home countries and are seeking sanctuary and protection from persecution, but they have not yet been legally recognized as refugees.
- › **Migrants** are people who are outside their country of origin but are neither refugees nor asylum seekers. Migrants leave their home countries for a variety of reasons, including to pursue work opportunities, join family, or escape political unrest or natural disasters.

Sources: UNHCR (unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee; unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/usa); Amnesty International (amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants).

In this article, I provide a brief overview of understanding trauma and offer strategies that teachers—in collaboration with other professionals—can implement. These recommendations are based on my classroom experience as well as resources on trauma-informed practices.

Understanding Trauma

When my school first began welcoming children whose families were seeking asylum, I noticed many questions, worries, and misunderstandings surfacing. I was almost finished with my master's degree in trauma-informed education, and I felt well positioned to gather resources and share them with my school community. I started with the concept of trauma and young children.

Young children do not always have the words to share what they are experiencing. This makes it even more important for us to tune into children's behaviors, as well as their words, to decipher what they are communicating. Children respond to trauma differently based on their stress responses, which include fight, flight, and freeze (see "Responses to Trauma" on page 18 for examples). Some children respond to stress by acting out, while others may withdraw. Teachers may be more likely to notice the stress response in children with challenging behaviors, but it's important to be aware of and check on children who are quieter or may be internalizing their stress or trauma. Paying attention to any changes in children's behaviors will help teachers understand what children need and identify strategies to address those needs.

In our school, for example, a teacher noticed that turning off the classroom lights elicited screaming from a child who had just joined their learning community. At first, the teacher didn't know how to react—she had been turning off the lights at the same time every day. She worked to learn what the child was communicating—fear and uncertainty. In collaboration with the social worker, the teacher created a social story to help acknowledge the child's feelings and talk about different ways to express them.

Trauma-Informed Practices

My colleagues and I may not know what kinds of trauma children and their families have experienced in seeking asylum, but we can be supportive by using trauma-informed practices. Overall, this looks like, as Paul Gorski stated, "withhold[ing] judgment and show[ing] concern." Trauma-informed strategies are not always visible or obvious. They often involve reframing how we think about children and their situations. Following are some strategies we use—and other educators can use too—to bring a trauma-informed lens to our work.

Create a Safe, Responsive Environment

Research highlights the importance of prioritizing physical needs and establishing a sense of safety, belonging, and love. These are foundational to learning and engagement in the moment and over time. Teachers can maintain high expectations for children while respecting and responding to their needs. For example, educators might reflect on classroom and school rules. Does breakfast need to end exactly at 8:00 a.m.? What would happen if there was some flexibility and children could eat when they were hungry? Creating a nurturing, responsive environment is an essential component of a trauma-informed approach.

Responses to Trauma

Stress Responses	Examples of These Responses in School
<p>Fight behaviors may include self-harm; an inability to be soothed; hitting, biting, and other aggressive behavior; or verbal abuse of others.</p>	<p>During a movement break, Chris bumps into Annie from behind. Annie is taken by surprise and reacts by pushing Chris to the ground.</p>
<p>Flight behaviors may include separation anxiety, regression in skills, significant changes in eating or sleeping patterns, worries about their own or others' safety, increased fearfulness, negative thinking, or frequent talk about death and dying.</p>	<p>The classroom door slams shut, and Rocco hides under the table.</p>
<p>Freeze behaviors may include a refusal to talk, limited eye contact, withdrawal from activities, ignoring directions, being overly dependent on others, or a lack of self-confidence.</p>	<p>During morning meeting, Mrs. Gilmore asks the question of the day. Elliot raises his hand, and she calls on him. He stares at Mrs. Gilmore and does not answer the question verbally or gesturally.</p>

Source: *Trauma & Young Children: Teaching Strategies to Support and Empower*, by Sarah Erdman and Laura J. Colker, with Elizabeth C. Winter (2020)

Prioritize Positive Relationships

Relationships are one of the cornerstones of early childhood education, especially trauma-informed education. Teachers build relationships by taking time to get to know each child and by contacting families for positive reasons. Last year, I noticed that most of my contact with families was centered around negative incidents (like biting). So I set a goal to send at least one positive note to every family every two weeks, and I tracked my feedback. (Our communication platform has a translation feature for sending and receiving messages.) Not only did this improve my relationships with families, but it also improved my relationships with the children and my ability to recognize and build on their strengths.

One of the most important factors is for children to have at least one stable, supportive relationship with an adult. Children may not be prepared for or receptive to a relationship at first. Teachers should not take their hesitations or rebuffs personally but instead continue to make attempts to know, include, and appreciate them. It is important to maintain unconditional positive regard for them and to believe in their capacity to grow and learn.

Individualize and Adapt Teaching Strategies

So many things have changed for children who are seeking asylum. They are in a new home and a new country. Their family unit may have split up. They may have left behind friends or pets. Often, they are being exposed to a new language, culture, and customs. Even the climate may be different. For example, one of the children in my school heard

a bird call during a neighborhood walk and shared that they had to leave their pet bird behind when they moved.

Teachers can help ease the transition by carefully considering the ways they organize the day. This includes attending to routines and transitions, providing ample amounts of playful activities, and focusing on the visual and linguistic environment. Within the context of a joyful environment, having predictable, though not necessarily rigid, routines and schedules (displayed using both print and images) will help create a sense of safety and stability. When children know what to expect, they can direct their energy toward learning rather than anticipating or worrying about surprises.

When speaking to and about children, language matters. It is humanizing and validating to learn the correct pronunciation of children's names, as is sharing qualities about them as individuals and as part of a community. Teachers can avoid using language like "the refugee kids," instead saying "newcomers" or just "children." This is a skill that I am constantly refining—to exercise humility and learn from my errors. Teachers can demonstrate respect and appreciation for children's home languages by learning key words in those languages.

Learning children's likes, dislikes, strengths, and needs can also guide educators' thinking about what might trigger a stress response and ways to implement a safe, engaging environment. Some common triggers include changes in lighting, sudden noises, and physical touch. Educators can offer warnings, additional support, child-friendly explanations, and options for finding a calmer space when

a known trigger may occur. Teachers can be truthful about what may happen (or has happened) and use clear, concise language that avoids jargon or complicated details. They can collaborate with specialists in their school or local community to learn about and offer additional trauma-informed supports.

Children who have experienced trauma may feel powerless. In addition to giving children a heads-up and explanations, it is important to build in opportunities for them to have agency and choice, such as asking a child which activity they want to do first or where they would like to sit for story time. It can include offering two appropriate choices to select from (“Would you like to put away the cars or the tracks first?”). In this way, the teacher meets the objective (cleaning up), and the child exercises some agency. When appropriate, children should have the right of refusal. Infusing opportunities for choice and voice will help children feel capable, respected, and a sense of control within a safe environment.

Offer Simple, Accurate Information

Children are naturally curious. Children who are asylum seekers as well as those who are not may ask questions about the situation. As mentioned earlier, teachers can support children by answering questions in simple, realistic terms and by being honest. For example, if a child asks, “When will I go back home?” a teacher can respond, “I don’t know. I do know that you are safe here, and we are happy you are here. Do you want to tell me about your home?”

Tap into Additional Resources

Children who have experienced trauma are often misunderstood and misdiagnosed due to the manifestation of their stress responses. Educators should consider the child’s context and circumstances as they work with specialists and colleagues to meet each child’s needs. Schools or programs may have teams or specialists who can assist teachers; if not, organizations or agencies in the local community may be able to help. These may include a school counselor or social worker; a special education teacher or intervention specialist to assist with adapting materials and activities; a community or agency liaison to share resources or services; or a family engagement specialist to create a network for families to connect with and support one another. (See “Further Resources” at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024) for more on how educators can support children and families.)

Conclusion

Children are resilient. Teachers can support children as they pursue their interests, participate in playful learning, and celebrate the joys in life. As teachers work with children who have experienced trauma, engaging in self-reflection and reaching out to others will help strengthen their practice. They can begin their own journey of professional learning by considering the following questions for reflection:

- › When am I exercising judgment before showing concern for children and families in my setting?
- › How do my personal values impact the expectations I have for children and their families?
- › Where can I infuse child choice and voice into our day?

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3B: Creating Caring Communities for Learning
3E: Responding to Children’s Interests and Needs

Standard 4: Assessment of Child Progress
4C: Identifying Children’s Interests and Needs and Describing Children’s Progress

Standard 7: Families
7A: Knowing and Understanding the Program’s Families



Dare to Roar

Tapping Families' Expertise to Guide Planning and Teaching

Jessie Snider

Three-year-old Theo rummages through the dress-up hooks. His face brightens, and a squeal emerges as he finds a red cape and yellow goggles. After asking for help to put them on, Theo begins “flying” around the room, navigating around shelves and furniture.

“I’m Superman!” he says. “I have superpowers! Watch me.”

In early childhood settings, children are some of the most confident people you’ll meet: They are bold, curious, and relational. They work together to tackle fears, overcome communication barriers, participate in creative endeavors, and try new ideas. Take a moment and ask a child to roar—their personality makes each sound daring and unique.

I am one of the lead teachers at the University of Idaho Children’s Center. I teach a rambunctious group of newly 3-year-olds. On any given day, there are between 16 and 20 of them, and it’s a constant collision of energy and curiosity.

Over my 10 years of teaching, I have learned that supportive strategies change from one child to the next. One of the most valuable tools in fashioning these is to partner with families. When a child enters my classroom for the first time, I ask

families, “What is your child’s superpower?” It’s an unexpected question, and the answers don’t disappoint. Some recent responses include

- › kindness
- › sass
- › cuddling
- › vacuum man
- › sonic shrieking

This question offers a way to connect with families and encourage them to share what they observe about their children’s strengths, needs, and/or interests. It helps early childhood educators give families a voice as they individualize activities and experiences so that they’re meaningful for each and every child. Following are some practical approaches we can use to partner with families and tap their expertise.

1 Welcome families' perspectives

Families need to know that they are important and valued in our learning communities. Strong relationships with each child's family create bonds of safety and connection for children. During drop-off and pickup times, ask families about their weekends, and listen to their stories. Also, make room for them throughout the learning day: One of my favorite events is family circle time, when families can share something special with us during large group. We have had family members read favorite books, teach songs, share pictures from family outings or trips, and bring in special toys. We vary the days and times and invite families to send in videos or pictures to make it easier for them to participate.

2 Incorporate home experiences into the learning environment

Activities that build on children's interests can boost their confidence and motivation. In addition to our superhero question, we regularly ask families to tell us about their children: What do they like to do at home, and has that changed recently? What is their favorite book or song right now? The answers help us provide familiar materials for children transitioning into our classroom, and they change throughout the year. We also invite families to contribute to curriculum webbing. Each month, we post a question by our classroom door and encourage everyone to share facts or ideas about it. From these, I create a curriculum web. Any family member can contribute—in person or via text or email.

3 Encourage children to share about their home and community contexts

Children are constantly constructing meaning from their experiences. Teachers can build on this through careful listening and observation. One day, as I was building with a few children in the block area, I overheard some conversations about houses and the colors of front doors. Over the next week, I asked families to email me pictures of their front doors. (One parent even sent a blueprint of their house!) We posted the pictures in our block area and created a binder of different blueprints for buildings. Adding real tools—levels, rulers, screwdrivers, and wrenches—inspired more language and conversation.

4 Build bridges from interests to content areas

Asking families about what we observe during the learning day can provide valuable information for individualizing instruction across the curriculum. When I noticed a child playing with pretend eggs every day, I asked his mom if the family raised chickens or cooked with eggs a lot. She said no but added that she'd also noticed his fascination with eggs. She shared that one day, he took the eggs out of the refrigerator and tossed them on the floor. "I couldn't get mad at him because he told me he was trying to get the baby chicks to come out," she said. So I prepared a series of activities to build on this interest and address multiple content areas: We learned about the life cycle of a chicken, painted by rolling eggs, and did an experiment where we used vinegar to dissolve the eggshell so that we could see and discuss what was inside.

5 Share children's explorations and growth

We often take pictures, so we can show families what their children are learning. These photos can be used as conversation prompts to help their children recall and retell. One child, Hallie, loves to dig in the dirt and squeal when she finds worms. She won't touch them; she just likes to observe as I hold them. One day, I had a tray of about five worms in mud. Hallie eyed the other children as they held the worms in their hands but was reluctant to hold them herself. With my encouragement, she gave it a try and exclaimed: "I did it! I did it! I'm soooooo brave!" Sharing this achievement with her family gave her a sense of pride and inspired her to keep exploring at home as well.

6 Offer ideas for extending children's learning at home

We love to ask questions in our classroom, and we offer families examples of open-ended questions that help scaffold children's critical thinking ("How can we see this in a new way?"; "What would happen if ___?"; "What else can we try?"). In our monthly newsletter, we include games or activities to try at home that complement what we have learned at school.

7 Make “superpowers” visible

Children flourish when we plan for their strengths and interests. When families describe their children’s superpowers, I work to incorporate these into individual lessons and activities. For example,

- › to build on **kindness**, I created opportunities for children to draw pictures describing how they use words and actions that are helpful.
- › during a book writing project, the children created and acted out a story about a skunk who befriends an owl and a moose while looking for tasty pink flowers. Through storytelling and dramatic play, the child with **sass** had several opportunities to showcase her silly flair.
- › I made space for one-on-one time for the child with **cuddling** superpowers.
- › to meet the interests of **vacuum man**, we learned about appliances and the fixtures in our classroom (fans, lights). We also pretended to vacuum the grass with lawn mowers made from sticks.
- › for our **sonic shrieker**, we learned yoga as a way to release built-up emotions and talked about ways to communicate needs positively. We also made space to roar and shriek outside or during songs at circle time, making sure to focus on strengths rather than challenges.

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Photograph: courtesy of the author

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Standard 4: Assessment of Child Progress
4E: Communicating with Families and Involving Families in the Assessment Process

Standard 7: Families
7A: Knowing and Understanding the Program’s Families
7B: Sharing Information Between Staff and Families

Too many children in preschool settings are missing out on interaction opportunities

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Asking Questions to Stretch Your Child's Thinking

Janis Strasser



When you ask your children questions—especially big, open-ended ones—you support their language development and critical thinking. Instead of asking questions with a one-word answer (“Who is your friend?”) or only one right answer (“What color is the crayon?”), try to open the door to conversations in a new way. During family routines like mealtimes or bathtime, while reading bedtime stories together or taking walks, or when you ask your child about their day at preschool, use the following strategies to encourage them to talk about themselves, their ideas, and their reflections.

1. Ask open-ended questions to spark conversations. Pose questions that will encourage your child to analyze, evaluate, and create, such as

- › What was the best (hardest, funniest, saddest) thing about your day at preschool?
- › What book did your teacher read today? Tell me the story.
- › If you had written the story, how would you have changed it?
- › If you were cooking for our family, what would you make for breakfast (lunch, dinner)? Why?

(See “Sample Open-Ended Questions” at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024) for more examples.)

2. Allow plenty of wait time. Children need time to process what you’re saying, think about it, and then answer. Give them at least a few seconds to respond, and vary the time according to their needs. You know your child best! If the question is one they don’t yet have the vocabulary to answer, modify it. During bathtime, for example, if your child doesn’t answer when you ask where they think it would be most fun to take a bath, ask if they would rather take a bath at home or at Grandma’s house and why. As your child grows and develops, their vocabulary will expand.

3. Listen to your child’s responses. Use active listening strategies: make eye contact, encourage your child to share their ideas, and restate or summarize what they say. For example, “You’ve told me that you love all of the books your teacher reads about animals. Let’s go to the library and see if we can find some other books about animals to read at home. Which animals would you like to start with?”

4. Ask another question or make a comment after your child answers. This further extends your conversation. If you aren’t sure how to respond, you can almost always say, “What else can we add to that?” or “Tell me more about that.” For example, “You told me yesterday that your favorite song in preschool is ‘Wheels on the Bus.’ Let’s make up a song to that tune to sing at breakfast that starts with, “One food on the table is toast, toast, toast . . .”

5. Have fun together! Don’t be afraid to use some big, juicy words to expand your child’s vocabulary. You’ll be amazed how they add these words to their conversations, once introduced. For example, “You have told me so much about the rock collection in preschool. Maybe you will be a *geologist* when you grow up.” Or “Let’s listen to that song you told me about when an *orchestra* performs it, rather than just a small band.”

Janis Strasser is professor emerita from William Paterson University. She has been a kindergarten/preschool teacher, Head Start education coordinator, and consultant, and she has written many articles for *Young Children* and *Teaching Young Children*.

To read more, check out *Big Questions for Young Minds*, by Janis Strasser and Lisa Mufson Bresson, published by NAEYC. Visit [NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/books/big-questions-young-minds](https://naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/big-questions-young-minds).

Science and Literacy

Connecting Science, Language, and Literacy Through Books

Cindy Hoisington and Yazmin C3lon Diaz



During the first week of a three-week shadows study, children in Yazmin’s preschool class explore their shadows outdoors. Yazmin encourages them to observe how their shadows look, move, and change as they run and jump. During the week, she reads books with shadow themes, including *Moonbear’s Shadow*, by Frank Asch. As always, she supports knowledge of print by moving her finger from left to right under the text as she reads. But she also uses the book to draw out children’s observations, descriptions, and ideas about shadows.

“What do you notice about the size of Moonbear’s shadow in this picture?” she asks. “How did Moonbear’s shadow change? Why do you think it won’t go away when he asks it to?”

Over the next two weeks, Yazmin adds indoor explorations of shadows with flashlights, objects, and shadow puppets. She continues integrating books to support children’s science, language, and literacy learning simultaneously.

Science is a perfect vehicle for supporting children’s language and literacy development through books. Reading and discussing science-focused books support children’s speaking and listening skills, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development. As children read books on topics they’re actively exploring, they also have opportunities to do what scientists do: raise questions, plan explorations, gain new knowledge, and share their findings, observations, and thinking with others.

Our team at Education Development Center and the Connecticut Science Center partner with Yazmin (the second author) and other early childhood teachers in Connecticut to

study strategies for supporting children’s language and literacy development through science. This integration of literacy across content areas is a key component of developmentally appropriate practice. Although our work focuses on children who are multilingual learners, we find that all children benefit when early childhood educators use books to support integration. Here, we offer strategies that you can use to incorporate books into a science unit and intentionally scaffold children’s science, language, and literacy learning.

Planning with Intention

Young children are born ready to wonder and explore as they look for the relationships and patterns that help them make sense of the world. Ongoing explorations of topics such as shadows, ramps, water, sound, colors, and living things excite and motivate them to talk, read, and write about their experiences, observations, ideas, and new learning.

Just like all teaching, planning for science and literacy integration must be intentional. It begins with thinking about the central concepts, or “big science ideas,” that will anchor and connect children’s direct explorations and book experiences. Two big ideas about shadows, for example, are that a shadow is created when an object blocks the light and that the shapes of shadows may change when the object or light source moves. (Knowing and choosing relevant “big science ideas” can be challenging; we’ve found resources like the PEEP and the Big Wide World educator site [peepandthebigwideworld.com/en], which is free and available in English and Spanish, to be helpful.)

Next, decide which of the purposes for using books in science you will focus on. You might use them to create excitement about a topic of study, draw out children’s thinking related to the big ideas, help children make connections to their

own experiences, and/or generate new ideas and questions for investigation. Finally, choose the direct experiences, books, and vocabulary that will be central to the unit and the sequence in which you'll introduce them to support children's science, language, and literacy learning.

Choosing Science-Focused Books to Support Language and Literacy Goals

Among other genres, children's texts include storybooks, informational texts, and mixed-genre books, which have elements of both. You can use all of these to support a range of language and literacy goals, as outlined below.

Storybooks

In the opening vignette, Yazmin read the storybook *Moonbear's Shadow*, about a bear who tries to escape from his shadow. During the reading, she supported children's understanding of the word *shadow* and engaged them in thinking about the idea that shadows are created when an object blocks the path of light. As the shadows study progressed, Yazmin introduced children to another storybook with a character who is frightened by giant shadows: *The Gruffalo's Child*, by Julia Donaldson. She used this book to nurture children's growing understanding of shadows, their ability to share their ideas in group conversations, and their descriptive (*bigger, smaller*) and positional (*in front of, behind, next to*) vocabulary.

Informational Texts

We have found that books like these are best introduced once children have had some opportunities to explore a topic firsthand. When choosing informational books, look for texts you can use to support children's thinking about their own observations and discoveries and to reinforce vocabulary related to the concepts they're exploring in class. Help children interpret, evaluate, and make sense of the text and images in the book. These are key language and comprehension skills.

Yazmin supplemented her shadows study with *Guess Whose Shadow?*, by Stephen R. Swinburne, and *Me and My Shadow*, by Arthur Dorros. These books present concepts and vocabulary related to shadows at different levels of complexity. They also provide many opportunities for you to help children do what scientists do—raise questions, plan explorations, gain knowledge, and share their findings, observations, and thinking with others. Informational texts do not have to be read cover to cover to be effective. You can also use them as research references to look up answers to children's specific questions.

Mixed-Genre Books

Mixed-genre books use fictional characters to communicate information. For example, in the English and Spanish versions of *Oscar and the Moth: A Book About Light and Dark*, by Geoff Waring, a wise moth teaches a curious kitten about where light comes from, how shadows are formed, and why it gets dark at night. In this book, the main character's questions often reflect questions that children also wonder about, such as where does the sun go at night? The text models an ongoing conversation between the characters. In general, look for mixed-genre books that focus on phenomena children can experience and observe with their senses rather than concepts that they cannot experience directly.

Strategies for Reading Science-Focused Books with Children

To make the most of science-focused books, read alouds should be interactive and stimulate children's observations and thinking about the science phenomena they're exploring. Based on research—including our own work with preschool teachers—we recommend you use the following strategies to help build children's emerging understanding of science concepts; their ability to ask questions, consider other perspectives, make inferences, and identify relationships; and their comprehension and vocabulary skills. (See "Strategies in Action" on page 26 for examples of how Yazmin used these strategies in her shadows study.)

- **Introduce explorations and books with an intentional message.** An *intentional message* sets the stage for upcoming activities, ties children's science and literacy experiences together, and supports comprehension and vocabulary learning. In our work, we use intentional messages beginning with the sentence stem "We can explore" to introduce related science explorations and book readings. This is an especially important strategy to use with multilingual learners because it clues them in to the upcoming activity and what to expect.
- **Use props to bring the images and words in the book to life.** Using concrete objects to demonstrate the actions and ideas described in the book supports children's comprehension and vocabulary by helping them connect the information conveyed in the text to their own experiences, observations, and ideas. Inviting children to demonstrate or role-play as you read further supports these conceptual connections.

Strategies in Action

During her unit on shadows, Yazmin employed the following strategies during read alouds to integrate science, language, and literacy.

Strategy	Example
Introduce concepts and books with an intentional message.	Yazmin introduces the exploration of outdoor shadows and her first reading of <i>Moonbear's Shadow</i> with the message "We can explore and observe how shadows move and change."
Use props.	Yazmin provides flashlights, classroom objects, and cardboard boxes lined with white paper, so children can create their own shadows. She reads <i>Oscar and the Moth</i> (first in Spanish and then in English) and invites children to take turns using a flashlight and a small animal figure to recreate the shadow images in the book.
Call attention to a book's images.	While reading <i>Guess Whose Shadow?</i> , Yazmin asks children to describe and compare the objects and their shadows shown in the photographs. Before turning the page, she asks for their ideas about what objects are making different shadows and why they think so. She also invites them to compare what they see in the images to the observations they made during their own shadows explorations.
Focus on vocabulary.	Yazmin introduces vocabulary words and discusses definitions with children. She uses props and small and large body movements as cues. She doesn't limit this experience to words about shadows but also introduces positional vocabulary (<i>up, down, around, closer, farther</i>) and words about the scientific process (<i>question, investigate, observe, explain</i>). She posts these words in both English and Spanish and shares them with families.

› **Encourage children to closely observe and describe images in books.** Talking with children about the images in a science-focused book helps them understand that images play a role in transmitting information. For example, focusing on photographs or scientifically accurate drawings in an informational text helps children interpret the images and understand that these graphics convey key information. When reading a storybook, you can help children evaluate the images for scientific accuracy by comparing them to what they've observed in their own explorations. These images can also be used to help children make inferences about how a character feels and behaves as they do and why.

› **Focus on vocabulary words and their meanings.** Identify a set of target vocabulary words that are responsive to your group's current vocabulary levels, and use read alouds as opportunities to discuss and deepen children's understanding of word meanings. Use a balance of science-related words (such as *observe, describe, and compare*) and rich, complex everyday words related to the topic. Try displaying words in both English and children's home languages, and introduce more complex words as a science study progresses.

With intentional and thoughtful planning, you can connect children's science, language, and literacy experiences, helping them to become knowledgeable thinkers, communicators, and readers. To get started, consider the following questions you might ask after a read aloud:

- › What do you think the author was trying to tell us/teach us about?
- › How was what we read similar to what we observed in our own explorations? How was it different?
- › What did we read about that you would like to learn more about?

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Beyond Itsy Bitsy

Spiders in the Early Childhood Classroom

William Straits

Although “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” is commonly sung in early childhood classrooms, spiders rarely find their way into other curricular activities. But as part of their everyday experiences, children frequently encounter spiders and their webs, and many children are fascinated by these animals. There are many spider-related activities that early childhood educators can integrate into a cross-curricular project or unit of study. Together, these activities can help children learn more about spiders while nurturing their natural curiosity about these amazing animals. In this article, I outline a plan for such a unit, with a focus on the structures and functions of spiders and their webs.

Safety Considerations and Learning Objectives

There are over 3,000 species of spiders found in North America, but only about 1 percent of these have bites that are harmful to humans. However, because some of these bites can be very dangerous and painful, be sure to do some research before beginning the unit. Look for pictures and descriptions of the types of spiders typically found in your region, and familiarize yourself with any potentially harmful spiders. Be sure to caution children not to touch or attempt to catch any spiders.

While your specific objectives will depend on the children in your setting, their needs, and their interests, science-focused learning objectives for this unit might include children being able to:

- › describe spiders’ body structures, such as their eyes, legs, bodies, and even their spinnerets or fangs
- › think and share ideas about how spiders use these different body structures
- › identify the structure of spider webs, with a focus on the different shapes or the different types of silk (sticky and nonsticky) that make up webs
- › think and share ideas about how webs help spiders to survive

As you plan and begin the learning experiences, it’s important to ask children to share what they already know and have experienced about spiders. Ask questions about spiders (“What do you know about spiders?”; “What do spiders look like?”; “What do spiders eat?”) and about their webs (“What do spider webs look like?”; “What do spider webs feel like?”; “Why do spiders build webs?”; “How does a spider know when something is caught in its web?”). After these important conversations, children will be eager to learn even more. Although the sequence of activities presented here can be altered to fit your curricular needs, it’s best to start with the concrete experience of observing actual spider webs.



Science



Observing and Documenting Spider Webs

This activity gives children an opportunity to search for spider webs at their program or school and to experience how these webs look and feel.

Materials

- › An unoccupied spider web
- › A spray mister with water
- › Tools for documenting observations (paper, pencils, a camera or phone for taking photos or videos)

Procedures

Go on a search outdoors with children to look for abandoned spider webs. Common locations to find webs include bushes and trees, fences, and door frames, but with hundreds of different spiders in your area, they can be found just about anywhere. When you find a web, check to see if the spider is nearby—some species of spiders will sit at or just past the edge of their webs.

Once you find an unoccupied web, gather children around to observe it. Gently spray the web with water from a spray mister to make the strands of silk easier to see. (Before spraying, reassure children that the water won't damage the web. And even if the web is damaged, many spiders repair or completely reweave their webs each day.)

Invite children to touch the web and to describe how it feels. Children may be surprised to find that some strands of silk are sticky and some are not. Encourage children to share their ideas about how spiders use different types of silk. Ask them to document what they observe—through writing, drawing, taking photos, or recording videos—so their observations can be revisited and discussed throughout the unit.

Key teaching strategy: Expand children's thinking and conversations by asking questions about the structure and function of the web, such as "How do you think the spider built this web?"; "What is the web connected to?"; "Is there anything caught in the spider's web?"

Making and Tinkering



Making Spider Webs

In this activity, children explore properties of different materials as they use them to make a spider web. These types of experiences can help build a foundation that contributes to later success in engineering.

Materials

- › Time-lapse video of a garden spider constructing a web
- › Several small balls of yarn
- › Several small chairs
- › Toy spiders and insects

Procedures

Show children a time-lapse video of a garden spider constructing its web. Point out that the spider first spins silk strands to support the web and then, after these strands are in place, the spider spins sticky silk in a spiral.

After watching and discussing the video, give children a small ball of yarn and invite them to make a spider web between the legs of a chair: Turn a small chair upside down. Tie pieces of string diagonally from chair leg to chair leg to serve as support threads. Tie the children's yarn to the center of this X, and let children weave their web by wrapping the yarn around each string in a spiral pattern. After they create their webs, provide toy spiders and insects so children can act out how spiders capture prey using their webs.

Key teaching strategy: Demonstrate how to use the materials to create a web. To add a challenge to this activity, offer other building materials for designing webs, like different kinds of string, smooth twine, long shoe laces, or thin rope; have children compare the materials and discuss which would make the best webs.

Physical Development



Web Walking

Building on children’s observations of spider webs, this activity engages them in developing physical skills while furthering their thinking about the structures and functions of spiders’ webs.

Materials

- › Masking tape
- › Dress-up clothes

Procedures

Use masking tape to create a large web on the floor. Encourage children to pretend to be spiders or flying insects negotiating this web. Invite them to walk across the web—either trying to stay on its strands (the tape) as spiders do or trying to step only between the strands of the web as potential prey would hope to do. Set out dress-up clothes, such as a spider hat with four “legs” hanging from each side, butterfly wings, or insect antennae headbands.

Key teaching strategy: Scaffold, as needed, the physical movements children would like to try.

Language and Literacy



Read Alouds

Through interactive read alouds and other engagements with texts, children can gain a greater appreciation for and understanding of these extraordinary animals.

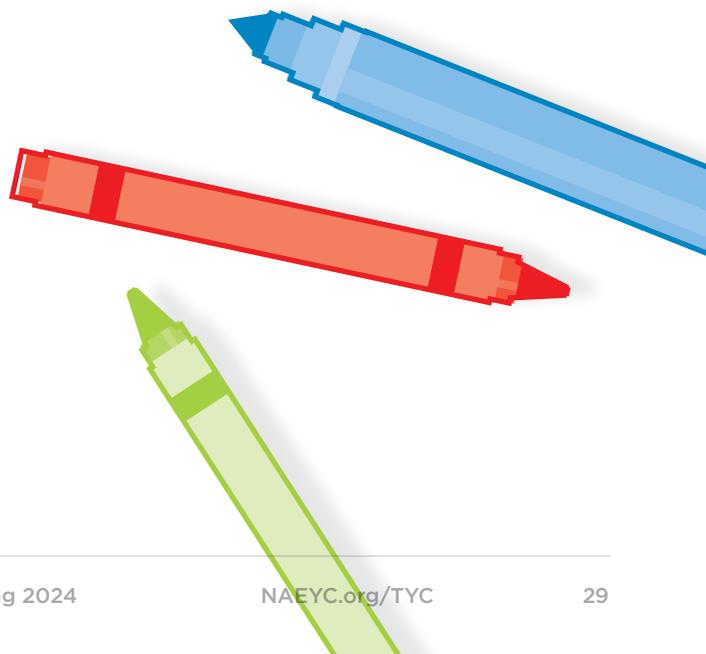
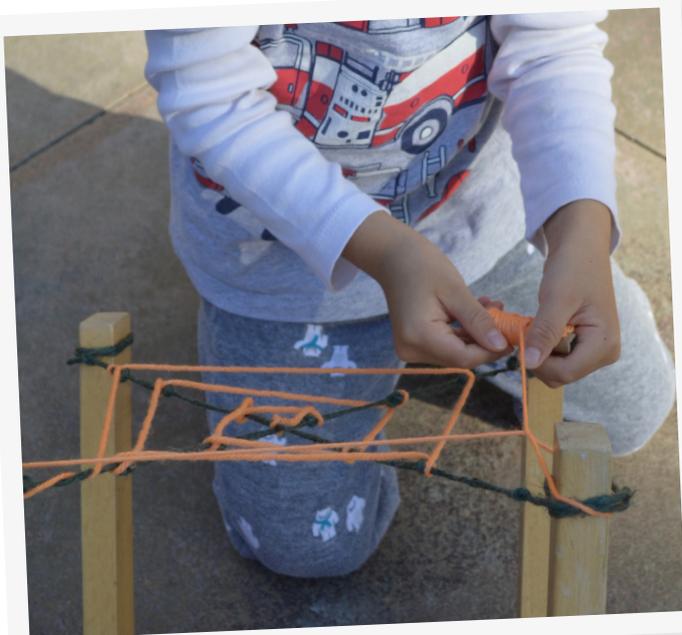
Materials

- › A variety of fiction, narrative nonfiction, and informational texts

Procedures

Throughout your unit, be sure to share a balance of different types of genres—such as narrative fiction, narrative nonfiction, and informational texts—to help expand children’s interest in and knowledge of spiders. As you read, model your own interest and curiosity about spiders, and encourage children to share their ideas, interests, and questions about them. See “Books About Spiders” at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024) for a list of titles to consider.

Key teaching strategy: As you and the children engage with texts, provide information, acknowledge children’s questions and responses to the content, and model different ways to find and understand information about spiders and their webs.



Math



Spider Web Math

Spiders and spider webs can provide an interesting and motivating context for math investigations, including counting, adding, and comparing numbers, while furthering understanding about the structures and functions of spider webs.

Materials

- › Paper plates
- › Plastic or paper flies

Procedures

Draw spider webs on paper plates and put a few plastic or paper “flies” on each plate. (Alternatively, children could create their own webs, or you could reproduce one from an existing resource.) Invite children to explore these materials, noticing that different numbers of flies are “caught” in each web. Children may be interested in comparing numbers (“Which web caught more flies?”), or they may want to use the numbers of flies caught in each web to create and solve addition problems (“This web caught 3 flies. This web caught 2 flies. How many flies were caught in all?”).

Key teaching strategy: After modeling a few ways to explore and think about the numbers of flies, encourage children to create and solve spider math problems of their own.

The Arts



Spider Art

After learning about spiders and their body structures, children can represent this learning through the creation of mixed-media spider sculptures.

Materials

- › Pictures of spiders
- › Available craft materials
- › Glue

Procedures

Provide various craft materials that could serve as spider bodies, legs, eyes, and maybe even fangs and spinnerets. Alternatively, you might provide a body as a starting point, then encourage children to decide how to create their spider from there. Two connected polystyrene balls (one large and one small) work well for this, but clay, pompoms, round sponges, plastic ornaments, foam cubes, and even small cardboard boxes will also work. Offer several possibilities for each body part. Some children may want to see pictures and illustrations of spiders as sources of inspiration.

Key teaching strategy: Encourage creativity. Although the typical spider has two main body parts, eight legs, eight eyes, and a mouth with fangs, encourage and celebrate any representation of a spider children would like to make.

William Straits is director of the National Center for Science in Early Childhood (sci4kids.org) and author of *A Head Start on Life Science*.

How Do You Display Children's Art?

Q I have read that you shouldn't write on the front of children's artwork. Instead, you should display their work with their name and any comments they made about their work written on a tag. What are others' opinions on this subject, and why has this been a practice?

AUDREI, NEW YORK

A I encourage children to put their own names on their work wherever they want. I also ask if they want me to write about their work directly on their paper, but I love the idea of a separate label. We have a dedicated art gallery where we showcase special projects; in most cases, children are invited to hang their work themselves. This way, they can choose whether they want their names displayed, and they have ownership of the classroom.

AMY, NORTH CAROLINA

I encourage children to write their own names on their artwork. If they don't want to or don't know how, I ask them where they would like me to write their names. Some children prefer their names on the back, and some children choose a space on the front. I used to write children's names on a spot that I chose and found that they would paint or draw over the name I wrote.

Now, they have a sense of ownership over where their names go. When displaying artwork, I usually write up something about the project and skills the children were working on while engaging with the materials so that families can see the learning documented.

SHERRIE, CALIFORNIA

We use sticky notes to record children's names, their dictation, and the date. I also have laminated name tags with each child's name and photo that I staple or tape under their work so that every child can find their work by either reading their name or finding their picture. Children can choose to write their names on their art or not. I give them plenty of opportunities to practice name writing through other learning experiences. I challenge children who are ready and/or like to draw and write to label a drawing of themselves with their names!

MELISSA, NEW YORK

NAEYC's **HELLO** online forum is a great place to have conversations and create connections with peers around important early learning issues. Excerpts from HELLO have been edited for style and length.

Do you have questions or suggestions to share with your peers? Are you simply interested in reading different takes from early childhood educators around the country? Tap into the vibrant discussions on HELLO at hello.NAEYC.org/welcomehello.



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Issue Date	Topic	Article Due Date
Fall 2024	Special issue focused on STEM	N/A*
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Spring 2025	Balancing Formats and Choice in Preschool	August 1, 2024

*These special issues are being developed with invited contributors.





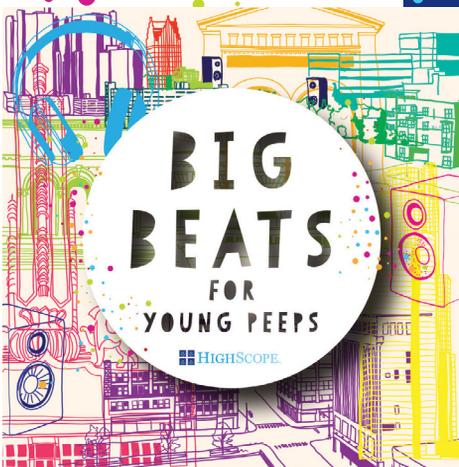
Big Beats for Young Peeps

Eclectic, upbeat, and guaranteed to inspire young children to move, **HighScope's Big Beats for Young Peeps** is a music collection that fills a gap in children's music by offering teachers and parents of children ages 0–8 culturally diverse, developmentally appropriate instrumental music that promotes movement and self-regulation skills.

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Approved by Parents' Choice, **Big Beats for Young Peeps** is available digitally or purchase the CD by shopping at [HighScope.org/product/big-beats-for-young-peeps](https://www.HighScope.org/product/big-beats-for-young-peeps).



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