

Interactions and Instruction in a High-Quality Classroom Help Young Children Learn

Beginning at birth, children learn about themselves and their worlds through their relationships with their families, caregivers, and teachers. When those relationships are sensitive to young children's development and maturation, they put children on the path to lifelong success.

An effective relationship starts with the establishment of trust and an understanding of child development. As children develop from birth through the 3rd grade, they move from concrete to abstract and symbolic thinking.

At the same time, with thoughtful instruction and practice they gain the ability to regulate their emotions, collaborate with their peers, and understand others' perspectives. Shifts in cognition manifest in all aspects of young children's development, which are deeply interrelated. Indeed, during a child's first eight years "emotional, social, physical, and thinking abilities are intertwined like a multi-fibred weaving. Each strand forms an essential part of the whole."¹

As children grow, a complex combination of experiences, environment, and family characteristics shape children's learning and development. Appropriate experience at the right stage of development determines the strength of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will

think and regulate emotions.² Positive early development lays the foundation for the full spectrum of skills, attitudes, and knowledge required to succeed in college and beyond. While deprivation undermines development, nurturing and stimulating early learning experiences help our young children thrive.

Because children learn best when they have rich interactions, early childhood teachers and caregivers have a responsibility to build

backgrounds and interests. In fact, a **substantial body of evidence shows that teacher-directed didactic instruction actually limits children's learning, creativity, and curiosity. Further, when young children do not engage in dramatic play at school, behavioral challenges and expulsions increase.**³ A high-quality early learning environment strikes a balance between child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and focused experiential learning guided by teachers, depicted by the orange area in Figure 1 (below).⁴

Interactions and instruction include the strategies teachers or caregivers use to engage young learners as they

scaffold new knowledge and skills. Teachers build relationships with each student through responsive interactions. When teachers speak in a warm tone and treat every student with respect, they establish a safe and stimulating environment in which children can explore new ideas and abilities. Instruction transpires when teachers approach children as active participants in their learning. They have rich conversations with their students to extend their thinking and present increasingly challenging tasks across all developmental domains. These interactions take place in large group settings, such as a morning meeting or when the teacher facilitates a group discussion about a topic they are investigating. In a high-quality classroom, most instruction occurs in learning centers. Indeed, teachers use small group interactions to differentiate instruction and conduct authentic assessments of children's progress. With the support

of a teacher who listens to the children, asks questions, and adds information, the children deepen their understanding of key concepts. As teachers scaffold children's learning, they rely on a variety of instructional techniques, including encouragement, giving specific feedback, modeling, adding a challenge, offering clues, providing information, and directions.⁶

■ **In prekindergarten,** teacher-child interactions are responsive. Through thoughtful interactions, teachers understand and build on students' prior learning, interests, and family experience in order to nurture each child's innate drive to acquire new skills and knowledge. Prekindergarten teachers are

sensitive to children's social and emotional development in order to cultivate children's love of school and learning.

■ **In kindergarten,** many children have their first experience with public school, which can shape lifelong attitudes toward school. It is especially important for teachers to support children's approaches toward learning: their attention, emotional regulation, flexibility, persistence, interests, and motivation to learn.⁷ Children at this age still vary dramatically in their development, and there is also a wide age range in many kindergarten classrooms. Thus, effective kindergarten

teachers must be highly skilled at individualizing interactions and differentiating instruction.

■ **In 1st to 3rd grade,** teachers' interactions and instruction need to focus on dispositions as much as academic goals because children are particularly sensitive to social comparisons and peer acceptance. Excellent teachers plan their lessons to encourage children to do their personal best and motivate children to make progress over time. Teachers encourage young students by acknowledging their critical thinking, persistence, and creativity.

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High Quality Interactions and Instruction in Action

In a high-quality kindergarten class, the teacher uses responsive interactions and comprehensive instructional strategies to create a caring learning community so that her students come to school eager to learn. The teacher begins the day with a morning meeting to help cultivate positive relationships among the students and affirm the culture of the classroom. The children greet one another at the beginning of the meeting and the children have a chance to participate in the group discussion, then the teacher introduces new content knowledge and the plan for the day. Then, the children have time to engage in child-initiated choice time in learning centers. The teacher scans the classroom to observe how her students are working together and to ensure they are engaged in appropriate activities. She sees one child who appears tired and is wandering from one center to the next without becoming actively involved. The teacher approaches the child to see

how she is feeling. The teacher has a strong and trusting relationship with her student, and the student shares that she had a difficult morning. First, the teacher sits with the child and listens, and then when the child seems ready, she encourages the child to go to the reading center, where she can sit comfortably and listen to a book on tape with her classmates. The books that the children can choose highlights key literacy constructs the children are developing, such as rhyming. The book also relates to the content they are exploring, such as their community. When the book is finished, the teacher returns to the reading center to engage the students in a discussion about the book and to check in with the child to see that she is feeling more comfortable and engaged. She also encourages the children to explain their opinions based on the story line as well as their personal experiences.

Interactions and Instruction address the New York State Learning Standards

The New York State Learning Standards promote college and career readiness by describing the knowledge and skills in math, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language that students should gain as they advance through the grades. Like developmentally appropriate practice, the New York State Learning Standards support interdisciplinary learning, higher order thinking, creativity, and

the use of language and literacy skills throughout the day. As students master the standards, they gain seven essential capacities that promote their intellectual development.⁸ A high-quality approach to interactions and instruction support each capacity.



Essential Capacities	Characteristics of High Quality Interactions and Instruction Curricula
Demonstrate independence	Provides students with ample opportunity to pursue their interests independently and collaborate with their peers. Teachers respect children's choices during child-initiated learning, which builds students' intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and independence. Teachers positively acknowledge children's independence and initiative.
Build strong content knowledge	Builds on children's interests and experiences during their interactions. Teachers ask open-ended questions to understand students' knowledge, respond to children's questions, and add additional information that spans subject areas to build a comprehensive knowledge base.
Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline	Includes rich discussion throughout the day. Teachers model communication strategies and help students to express themselves appropriately with their peers. Young learners' communication skills flourish when they have responsive relationships with their teachers.
Comprehend as well as critique	Promotes curiosity and critical thinking when teachers ask open-ended questions and follow-up questions. Teachers encourage students to ask questions of one another during small group work.
Value evidence	Provides opportunities for students to explain their opinions and statements when they interact with one another in whole group, small group, and individual conversations. They ask children to find evidence in a text to support their thinking. For example, "How do you know Goldilocks was scared? What did she do or say that showed you how she felt?" They encourage children to plan and review their work and to represent what they know in several ways (e.g., verbally and pictorially).
Use technology and digital media strategically and capably	Digital media is used sparingly because young students learn best through interacting with their peers and their teachers and through hands-on learning.
Understand other perspectives and cultures	Recognizes that students' family backgrounds play a significant role in how they approach learning. When teachers interact with young learners, they learn about a child's family to help the child establish a strong sense of self and they learn to value the strengths of every child's family. Teachers' interactions demonstrate and model acceptance, appreciation, and value of diversity.

Strategies For Teachers

- Speak with young students in a warm, caring, and encouraging tone
- Listen to children and encourage them to respectfully listen to one another
- Structure the day so that the majority of time is spent in one-on-one and small group interactions with students
- Use a variety of techniques that are responsive to young students' learning styles, experience, and culture, including encouragement, giving specific feedback, modeling, adding a challenge, offering clues, providing information, and giving directions.

Strategies For Leaders

- Hire teachers with expertise in early childhood education and cultural and linguistic competence to teach in prekindergarten to 3rd grade
- Select curricula that foster rich discussion and interactions among teachers and students
- Provide professional development that encourages responsive and appropriate interactions
- Ensure teachers have sufficient time to engage in elaborated, authentic interactions with students by limiting class sizes and providing adequate staff support

To learn more and view the other briefs in this series that address curriculum, the classroom environment, instruction and interactions, assessment and family engagement, please visit the New York ECAC website at www.nysecac.org or contact us ecac@ccfny.gov



Figure 1. Early Childhood Instructional Continuum⁵
The orange section depicts the "sweet spot" for maximum learning, trust and discovery.



Photo courtesy of Community Playthings

Responsive Interactions and Instruction in Prekindergarten through 3rd Grade: Building a Strong Foundation for the New York State Learning Standards

As members of the NYS Early Childhood Advisory Council, the NYS Head Start Collaboration Office, the NYS State Education Department, and the NYS Association for the Education of Young Children providing guidance to support our youngest students, their families, teachers, and leaders by highlighting key features of high quality early childhood teaching. **We firmly believe that young students can best meet New York State Learning Standards when they have effective teachers who use intentional, experiential, and developmentally and culturally appropriate practices.** This brief provides helpful strategies related to setting up a classroom environment that will help to put the State's young learners on a path to social and intellectual success as they master the foundational skills to meet the New York State Learning Standards.



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Resources

- **PreK-3rd: Getting Literacy Instruction Right**
Foundation for Child Development, Nonie K. Lesaux
www.fcd-us.org/resources/prek-3rd-getting-literacy-instruction-right
- **Engaging Interaction and Environments**
Head Start National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL)
www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/practice/engage
- **Classroom Assessment Scoring System**
Teachstone
www.teachstone.com/the-class-system/
- **New York State Education Department**
www.nysed.gov

Sources

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- ⁷ Tomlinson, H.B. (2009). *An overview of development in the kindergarten year*. In C. Copple and S. Bredekamp (Eds.). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice In Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- ⁸ New York State Education Department. (2010). *New York State P-12 New York State Learning Standards for English language arts and literacy*. Retrieved February 27, 2014 from: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/earlylearning/standards/>



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Guidance from
New York State Head Start Collaboration Office
New York State Association for the Education of Young Children
New York State Education Department

