

APPROACHES TO LEARNING - DRAFT

Introduction

Approaches to learning, such as initiative and persistence, are behaviors and attitudes that show *how* children learn, not just *what* they learn. The National Education Goals Panel identified “Approaches Toward Learning” as one of five dimensions of school readiness for early learners along with physical development, social and emotional development, language development, and cognition.

The approaches to learning standards build on the preschool social emotional development standards and the New Jersey 21st Century Life and Careers standards, reflecting an understanding of what we know from recent studies and current brain development research about how children learn. Children with higher levels of attentiveness, task persistence, eagerness to learn, learning independence, flexibility, and organizational skills do better in both literacy and math at the end of the kindergarten school year and the beginning of their first grade year (Conn-Powers, 2006).

The way a child approaches learning is a strong predictor of later success in school. School readiness includes the ability to tackle and persist at challenging or frustrating tasks, follow directions, take risks, make and learn from mistakes, and work as a part of the group. Young children develop these skills by engaging in learning experiences through play, which strengthens cognitive capacities such as paying attention, remembering rules, and inhibiting impulses to achieve a larger goal (Tomlinson, 2012).

Environments for young children promote positive approaches to learning when they are carefully designed to embrace diverse learners by offering them many avenues for developing physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills. For example, research shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language skills than non-players, better social skills, more empathy and imagination, and show greater self-regulation and higher levels of thinking (Miller, 2009).

Children learn best when offered interesting open-ended materials for exploration. They are also more likely to understand and remember relationships, concepts, and strategies, and also to reach higher levels of mastery when they learn with materials that build on their interests.

Teachers play an important role in nurturing approaches to learning by developing caring and respectful relationships with children and their families. Children who feel valued and receive the message that they are capable learners become engaged and excited about learning. When children are given ample time to deeply engage in developmentally appropriate, challenging learning experiences, rewards and other incentives to learn and behave become unnecessary. These standards provide teachers with effective preschool teaching practices accompanied by examples, to encourage and support children’s approaches to learning. It is the teacher’s responsibility to work with families so that they can encourage and support children’s approaches to learning at home.

There are four preschool standards for approaches to learning:

Standard 9.1 Children demonstrate initiative, engagement, and persistence.

Standard 9.2 Children show creativity and imagination.

Standard 9.3 Children identify and solve problems.

Standard 9.4 Children apply what they have learned to new situations.

Each of these four standards is further elaborated in the sections that follow. For each standard, effective preschool teaching practices are listed, followed by the preschool competencies that develop as a result of those practices.

Standard 9.1: Children demonstrate initiative, engagement, and persistence.

Preschool Teaching Practices

Effective preschool teachers:

- Listen closely, respond to, and take pleasure in children’s curiosity. Nurture children’s curiosity by providing thought-provoking, hands-on experiences that motivates them to apply their developing skills and prior knowledge and that challenges them to think.
- Be fully present by identifying and minimizing distractions that detract from giving full attention to working intentionally with children. Help children learn to wait while you are working with another child, and help children listen respectfully to one another.
- Engage children in prior planning but be flexible enough to change plans if children are not actively engaged in an activity. Gradually lengthen the time children are expected to remain engaged in activities or experiences.
- Help children learn to self regulate (i.e., focusing attention on relevant information while ignoring or filtering out irrelevant information). Play games in which children must listen carefully and follow more than one direction (e.g., “Simon says, stand on one foot and touch your nose”).
- Encourage children’s initial attempts at a task by providing specific, positive verbal feedback (e.g., “you didn’t give up until you mixed just the right color”) rather than praising them for cleverness or giving them rewards like stickers or prizes.
- Provide physical, verbal, or emotional support to a child who is unfocused or discouraged (e.g., sitting close to a child struggling to accomplish a task,

acknowledging their frustration, and helping them figure out what to do). Honor the pace of every child, knowing that some children need more time to complete a task.

- Provide children with time, space, and opportunities to make choices from among interesting materials that are familiar and challenging. Rotate materials regularly to maintain children’s interest. Provide extended periods of time to allow children to get deeply involved in learning experiences that they initiate or that build on class topics.
- Support children’s efforts during challenging tasks by responding to questions, ideas, and requests for help. Children tend to show greater persistence on tasks that are challenging for them.

Preschool Learning Outcomes

Children will:

Preschool Number	Preschool Indicator	P-12 Database Number
9.1.1	Make plans and decisions to actively engage in learning (e.g., two children greet each other as they arrive to school and decide that they will finish counting all the bottle caps they collected during choice time.)	
9.1.2	Show curiosity and initiative by choosing to explore a variety of activities and experiences with a willingness to try new challenges.	
9.1.3	Focus attention on tasks and experiences, despite interruptions or distractions.	
9.1.4	Show persistence when faced with challenging tasks and uncertainty, seeking and accepting help when appropriate.	
9.1.5	Bring a teacher-directed or self-initiated task, activity or project to completion.	

Standard 9.2: Children show creativity and imagination.

Preschool Teaching Practices

Effective preschool teachers:

- Model open-mindedness and creativity. Demonstrate that there may be more than one way to do things or to solve problems and help children to generate alternatives and weigh the options (e.g., “It’s raining and we can’t go outside. What can we do instead?”).
- Observe children closely in order to find ways to see, value, and extend children’s ideas (e.g., The teacher notices that while Xander is painting at the easel, he is telling a story about his picture. She listens as Xander narrates his painting and writes in her observation notes that Xander is painting a picture of his new baby sister. Using rich vocabulary, she reflects Xander’s language back to him and asks him clarifying questions.).
- Provide opportunities for imaginative play and creative storytelling. Read or write stories in which children change or make up their own endings. Take note when imaginative play is becoming more complex (e.g., children are taking on more diverse roles and are using a wider variety of props or creating their own) and support children in extending their abstract/symbolic thinking.
- Support multiple means of creative expression. The visual arts (e.g., drawing, collage, painting, sculpture), the performing arts (e.g., puppets, music, dramatic play, and creative movement) and technology (e.g., using software to create books and illustrate them) offer many opportunities for all children, regardless of their abilities, personal experiences, language and cultural background, to communicate what they feel, think, know, and understand.
- Emphasize process over product. Children who are directed to conform to expected outcomes lose the confidence and spontaneity essential for the development of creative thinking.

Preschool Learning Outcomes

Children will:

Preschool Number	Preschool Indicator	P-12 Database Number
9.2.1	Show flexibility in approaching tasks by being open to new ideas (i.e., doesn't cling to one approach to a task, but is willing to experiment and to risk trying out a new idea or approach).	
9.2.2	Use the imagination to solve problems, use materials, role play, write stories, move the body, or create works of art (e.g., create pretend spinach out of torn green construction paper to serve for dinner).	
9.2.3	Use multiple means of communication to creatively express thoughts, ideas, and feelings (e.g., sing a song and act out the story of the life cycle of a butterfly).	

Standard 9.3: Children identify and solve problems.

Preschool Teaching Practices

Effective preschool teachers:

- Have conversations devoted to topics that are interesting to children and that offer challenging, relevant problems to solve. Stretch children's thinking and use interesting language and vocabulary in these conversations.
- Notice children's repeated explorations that build their understanding of abstract ideas (e.g., after observing children spending an entire outdoor period watching different objects roll down the slide, the teacher encourages children to create ramps indoors and provides a variety of objects for children to roll down the ramps).
- Help children to break down a problem into manageable pieces, consider what information is needed and apply strategies for solving problems (e.g., The children return from playing outside and report that one of the girls has found a dollar on the playground. Everyone has a different idea about what she should do with the dollar. At circle time, the teacher listens to the children's ideas and asks the children what they think they should do? Although many children think she should buy something for the classroom, one child says they should find out if anyone has lost a dollar. Children brainstorm ideas to identify the owner of the dollar. The teacher makes a list of their ideas and helps them decide on the next steps to take.).

- Encourage children to learn from their mistakes (e.g., Amber forgets that it is library day. When she begins to cry and then to blame her mom for not reminding her to bring the book, the teacher first helps Amber think of what she can do to remember to bring her library book to school on library day. She then invites Amber to take a classroom book home and to try out one of the strategies for remembering to bring back the book on library day.).
- Help children see themselves as thinkers. Infuse the words think and thinking when talking with children. Give the child time to think before responding. Model thinking by using self-talk (e.g., “Adriana, Tamika, and Henry are not here today. Let’s think about out how many places we need to set for snack.”).
- Offer specific feedback (e.g., “You used every unit block to build a strong, tall tower.” Avoid vague words, such as “nice work” and exaggerated praise, such as, “You are the best builder in the class.”).
- Build on what children are learning by asking open-ended questions (e.g., “What do you think would happen if you...?” “What else could you do with...?” “Can you think of another way to...?”).
- Engage children in the cycle of inquiry when exploring or experimenting with a science or math topic. Identify a problem, ask questions and probe for answers, conduct investigations, gather and analyze data, identify patterns and rules, test rules (predicting what will happen based on the rules), and document the process.
- Give children many opportunities for rehearsal and practice in learning new concepts or skills and give them strategies to recall information (e.g., “This spring we will draw a picture of the apple tree that we observed outside so that we can compare it to the one you drew in fall and winter.”).
- Encourage effective teamwork. Create investigations or projects where children can problem-solve interdependently. Encourage conversations between children, guiding them in listening to one another, sharing ideas, and welcoming the input and perspective of others. Help them understand that because what they do and say affects others, they need to consider the impact of their words and choices.
- Help children think about their thinking (metacognition) by giving them many opportunities to become more aware of their own thoughts, feelings, intentions, and actions. Help children critically evaluate their own and other’s ideas and decide which ones are worth exploring.

Preschool Learning Outcomes

Children will:

Preschool Number	Preschool Indicator	P-12 Database Number
9.3.1	Recognize a problem and describe or demonstrate ways to solve it alone or with others.	
9.3.2	Use strategies to seek or recall information and to find answers (e.g., questioning, trial and error, testing, building on ideas, finding resources, drawing, or thinking aloud).	
9.3.3	Predict what will happen next based on prior experience and knowledge and test the prediction for accuracy (e.g., raising the height of the ramp to see if the ball will roll farther than when the ramp was lower).	
9.3.4	Reflect on, evaluate, and communicate what was learned.	

Standard 9.4: Children apply what they have learned to new situations.

Preschool Teaching Practices

Effective preschool teachers:

- Provide time for children to revisit and reflect on their experiences and learning through a variety of methods (e.g., discussion, conversation, journaling, art activities, music) and apply what they learn to new experiences.
- Link the new to the familiar by helping children relate stories and activities with their own life experiences and prior knowledge (e.g., stories about babies after a sibling is born, stories about buildings and photos of construction from the neighborhood in the block area, and authentic music and food from India to celebrate a recent immigrant classmate's birthday).

- Give children opportunities to see connections in fun and playful ways. Tap into children’s passion and enthusiasm and build on it (e.g., a child who is interested in spiders can read about them, play games about them, observe them, draw them, and write stories about them).
- Give children ample opportunities for socio-dramatic role play to develop empathy and perspective-taking (e.g., when taking on the role of a doctor wrapping a broken leg in the dramatic play area, child uses comforting words to console the patient with the broken leg).
- Give children feedback on their thinking to help them make new connections and applications (e.g., “Emily, you said that you saw the Olympics on TV and think you can jump as far as the gold medal winner in the long jump. When we go to the playground today, let’s measure how far you can jump! What can we use to measure the distance?”).

Preschool Learning Outcomes

Children will:

Preschool Number	Preschool Indicator	P-12 Database Number
9.4.1	Use prior knowledge to understand new experiences or a problem in a new context (e.g., after learning about snakes, children make comparisons when finding a worm on the playground).	
9.4.2	Make connections between ideas, concepts, and subjects (e.g., children take pictures from a field trip or nature walk, and use them to write and illustrate classroom books).	
9.4.3	Demonstrate understanding of what others think and feel through words or actions.	

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The following standards informed our Approaches to Learning Standards:

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Good Start Grow Smart: Approaches to Learning. South Carolina Early Learning Standards for 3, 4 & 5 Year –Old Children. (Revised 2009).

Head Start Approaches to Learning (Domain 7).

Iowa Early Learning Standards. *Approaches to Learning*. pp. 61-66.

Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines for Ages 3 to 5. (Revised 2005)

New Jersey Birth to Three Early Learning Standards. (Draft 2012.)

Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood. (Revised 2009)

Rhode Island Early Learning Standards. (2003)