

Early Childhood Curriculum: From Planning to Practice Participant Guide

8 Hours

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Training Evaluation

In a few days, you will receive an email from Develop asking you to complete an online training evaluation from this event called a Training and Trainer Evaluation Tool (TTET). We would really appreciate your input about trainer performance, the content, and training environment so that we can make improvements along the way. We use your feedback when we revise courses and schedule training events.

Session 1 Overview

KCF Content Area:

KCF Content Area: II.A Creating a Positive Learning Environment

CDA Content Area:

CDA Subject Area: II. Steps to advance children's physical and intellectual development

Course Description:

Explore the foundations of early childhood curriculum from planning and designing to implementation. Compare a variety of curriculum approaches and build skills in selecting curriculum that supports children's unique needs and interests. Apply tools such as the ECIPs, authentic assessment, and observation to guide intentional planning and create inclusive, culturally responsive environments that honor children's identities and diverse backgrounds.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, engaged participants will:

- Explore the foundations of early childhood curriculum, including the characteristics and components that support developmentally appropriate practice.
- Discuss a variety of curriculum approaches that early childhood programs use to guide children's development and learning.

Course Outline:

Section	Section Time	Key Concepts
A	15 minutes	Welcome/Introductions Objectives Review
B	35 minutes	Introduction to Early Childhood Curriculum Definitions of Curriculum

Section	Section Time	Key Concepts
C	35 minutes	Early Childhood Curriculum Characteristics and Components
D	25 minutes	Early Childhood Curriculum Approaches
E	10 minutes	Objectives Review/Closing
Total Time:	2 hours	

Defining Curriculum

Highlight the similarities and differences you see in these definitions. Reflect on how you define curriculum as an early childhood professional. Do your current practices align more closely with one definition over another?

“Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs,” NAEYC

“Curriculum consists of developmentally appropriate and educationally significant goals and outcomes as well as all aspects of the environment, materials, play, and learning experiences, and planned interactions that promote children’s learning and attainment of the specified goals and outcomes” (Freidman, Wright, & Masterson, 2022, p. 215).

Office of Head Start

Curriculum “provides guidance on what (content) and how (learning experiences and teaching practices) to teach. Content is drawn from current child development science, the interests and ideas of the children, family input, and the values of the community” (Headstart.gov, n.d.).

Foundations of Early Childhood Education, WisTech Open

“Curriculum in ECE refers to the planned and spontaneous experiences, interactions, and environments that support children’s learning and development. It encompasses a wide range of teaching practices, materials, and strategies designed to foster cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth” (Steffes et. al., 2025).

NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Position Statement

“Curriculum consists of the plans for the learning experiences through which children acquire knowledge, skills, abilities, and understanding. Learning through play is a central component of

curriculum, and it incorporates strategies to extend learning through play across the full age and grade span of early education” (NAEYC., 2025).

Early Childhood Curriculum Investigation: Characteristics

Name of Curriculum Approach _____

Characteristic	Notes
Has a clear, well-defined program philosophy that supports joyful learning	
Specific goals and objectives for meeting children’s learning and developmental needs	
Addresses all areas of development, including language, literacy, math, science, social and emotional, and physical development, while also allowing children to make choices and take ownership of their learning	
Includes rich, meaningful content relevant to children’s learning, experiences, interests, and developmental needs	
Incorporates adaptations and modifications to ensure all children have independent access and can fully participate	
Uses observation and documentation to inform ongoing assessment of children’s progress	
Provides opportunities for play that support emerging skills in active and social ways	
Incorporates the experiences, perspectives, cultures, languages, and strengths of a diverse range of children and families	
Has a predictable, yet flexible, schedule that is responsive to individual children’s needs	
Incorporates a wide variety of materials to engage children’s curiosity and interest	

Supports strong family partnerships and involves families in goal setting and making decisions related to their child’s care and education	
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Early Childhood Curriculum Investigation: Components

Curriculum Component	Curriculum Investigation	Ideas to Incorporate
Time (Schedules, Routines, and Activities): • Consistent routines throughout the day fit with the ages of children served • Daily schedules include blocks of time for child-led play • The schedule has a balance of teacher-directed and child-directed activities • Learning experiences fit the ages and abilities of the children, address all learning domains, and encourage active learning. • The daily schedule reflects the understanding that children learn and develop throughout all moments of the day		
Physical Environment: • The use of the environment reflects learning across all domains • The environment includes areas for children to play alone or in small groups • The environment is arranged to support children’s growing independence • Children’s art is respectfully displayed		

• The environment reflects children’s lives, interests, culture, and the diversity that exists within the community		
Equipment and Materials: • The equipment available to children is developmentally appropriate • There is a variety of materials available so that each child can be actively involved in age-appropriate activities • The materials are culturally diverse and reflect the interests of the children. • The materials incorporate all learning domains to encourage the development of new skills		
Relationships and Interactions: • Educators observe, listen, and respond to children’s questions, interests, and needs, and engage them in meaningful conversations • The interactions between adults and children create a positive climate. Adults model kindness and respect through their everyday interactions • Educators help children understand and express their emotions and needs, and use positive behavior guidance • Educators promote and model inclusion of all children and strive to create a sense of community by demonstrating that each		

child is a valued member of the group		
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Final Thoughts

- What have you learned or remembered today as a result of our discussions?
- What are some new ideas you are thinking about based on this session?
- What are some things you plan to do based on what you learned?

Assignments

- Curriculum Investigation: Investigate your assigned curriculum approach using the Early Childhood Curriculum Investigation Characteristics and Components worksheets as guides. Bring your notes with you to the next session to share with the group.
- Please bring with you an example of a lesson plan that you're currently using to the next session. If you aren't currently using a lesson plan, simply write down at least three activities that you do with the children between sessions.

Session 2 Overview

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this session, engaged participants will:

- Demonstrate investigating and selecting developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum.
- Recognize the role of the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) in understanding and planning experiences to support children's development.

Course Outline:

Section	Section Time	Key Concepts
A	10 minutes	Welcome/Introductions Objectives Review
B	30 minutes	Curriculum Investigation Results
C	30 minutes	Introduction to the ECIPs
D	30 minutes	Using the ECIPs to Guide Lesson Planning
E	10 minutes	Demonstrating Curriculum Alignment to ECIPs
F	10 minutes	Objectives Review/Closing
	Total Time: 2 hours	

Curriculum Investigations Presentation

Getting to know several different curriculum approaches helps early childhood programs make informed decisions about which curriculum to use in their setting. Partner with others who have explored the same curriculum as yours and discuss your findings. Think about what you would want someone who has never heard of this curriculum to understand about it, and write down several key points you learned about this approach. Present information that answers the following questions:

- What makes this curriculum approach unique?
- Does your curriculum approach meet all of the early childhood characteristics? Which ones were missing?
- What did you note about the four components of curriculum? Describe the environment, materials, and activities the approach uses.
- How does this curriculum define the role of the educator? Is it more child-led or teacher-directed?
- What does a typical day look like using this approach? Is the curriculum more structured or flexible? How responsive is the curriculum to children's individual needs?
- How would this approach work for various age groups, including infants and toddlers, preschoolers, or mixed ages?

- What could make this approach challenging to implement in your setting?

Practical Application

Curriculum Investigations: Ideas to remember

Reflection – Aligning Curriculum with ECIPs

To consider the curriculum aligned with the ECIPs, there must be at least one example of learning experiences in each of the eight domains, for each age group: infants/toddlers and preschoolers.

The domains of learning addressed in the ECIPs are:

- Approaches to Learning
- The Arts
- Language, Literacy, and Communications
- Mathematics
- Physical and Movement Development
- Scientific Thinking and Exploring
- Social and Emotional Development
- Social Systems

What types of activities would you need to add to these lesson plans, or to future lesson plans, to meet this requirement?

What additions are needed to your program environment, materials, or teaching methods?

Write down your goals:

Final Thoughts

- What are some key ideas you learned in this session?
- What two things will you take back to your program based on what you have learned today?
- What action steps do you have after taking this training?

Assignments

- Assignment 1: Gather a copy of any observation or assessment tools used in your program (if there are any) to assess or record children’s development while in the program. You may have an observation form, a checklist, or another tool that you use. Bring a copy to the next session.
- Assignment 2: As you are working with young children, stop to observe and notice something that a child does that makes you curious. Make notes about what you observe the child is saying and doing. Use the space provided in your Participant Guide to record your observations. Do not name the child; to respect privacy, use initials such as “J” for Jacob or “M” for Maria.

Child Observations

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Session 3 Overview

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this session, engaged participants will:

- Describe the purposes of assessment in early childhood education, including identifying children's strengths and interests, tracking developmental progress, and guiding curriculum planning.
- Practice observation and documentation techniques that promote objective, equitable, and authentic assessment of children's learning through their daily routines and play.

Course Outline:

Section	Section Time	Key Concepts
A	10 minutes	Welcome/Objectives Review Content introduction
B	30 minutes	Definitions, Practices, and Purposes of Assessment
C	20 minutes	Assessment Methods and Tools
D	35 minutes	Gathering and Using Assessment Data
E	15	Addressing Bias and Ensuring Accuracy in Assessment
F	10 minutes	Objectives Review/Closing
	Total Time: 2 hours	

What is Assessment?

Definitions

Assessment is “a systematic means of collecting and documenting information about children's learning and development to monitor children's progress towards learning goals.” (NAEYC, 2022, p. 160).

Authentic assessment involves observing, documenting, and evaluating children's skills, knowledge, and behavior during their everyday activities and routines. The process of authentic assessment helps to tell the whole story of the child, including their development, cultural context, and life experiences. Educators who are familiar with the child use a variety of tools to collect evidence and interpret what they discover to create individualized learning plans that recognize and respond to children's unique needs and interests.

Assessment Process

Assessment involves a three-step process. Each step is essential in understanding the child and making intentional decisions about how to support the child's progress.

- Gathering information about children’s learning and development through observation.
- Documenting what is observed or learned to capture information about what children know and can do.
- Reflecting on the information observed and documented to make decisions about the learning experiences and interactions that best support the child.

Purposes

The purposes of assessment include

- Understanding children’s learning and development
- Guiding planning and instruction
- Tracking progress over time
- Evaluating and improving teaching strategies and programming
- Communicating valuable information to families
- Identifying opportunities for individualized intervention

Assessment Methods and Tools

Screening	Identifies how children are growing, developing, and learning in general areas of development; identifies children who could benefit from additional practice or services to reach milestones; does not diagnose developmental disabilities or delays, but may lead to referrals to a specialist for early learning opportunities
Diagnostic Assessment	A standardized assessment used by specialists to identify a developmental delay or disability, as well as determine the extent of the delay.
Interviews/interactions and questions	Gathering data by asking questions to children or family members; interviews can be information conversations or formal meetings, such as intake sessions and family conferences.
Anecdotal notes	Notes or brief stories that are written to capture an emerging skill or behavior of children during play and activities. Anecdotal notes often focus on a single event and capture meaningful moments that inform about children’s learning or behavior.
Running records	A detailed description of what a child does over a length of time and as a sequence of events (<i>For example, 10:05 am – Nora goes to the play area</i>

	<i>and chooses a basketball, 10:02 – Nora puts the ball down and runs to the swings, etc.); used to understand development and behavioral patterns.</i>
Frequency Counts	A tally of specific events or behaviors that occur during a predetermined time period; often used to measure how often something occurs (<i>for example, the number of children who visit the dramatic play area in one hour</i>)
Checklists	Documents specific, predetermined developmental milestones, skills, and behaviors; determines if a skill or behavior is not yet observed, emerging, or mastered; used to track development over time, identify areas of improvement, plan learning experiences, and communicate with families.
Portfolios or work samples	A collection of children’s work or activities gathered over time, from showing children’s daily activities to demonstrating children’s abilities and behaviors. May include forms like photos, videos, artwork, writing samples, etc.

Using Assessment Data to Plan

Assessment Data (Observation Notes)	Educator's response to the data
The educator observes that a 3-year-old child rarely participates in group conversations during circle time and doesn’t join in when the other children sing songs or engage in rhyming activities.	
An educator records the following exchange between two children: Jacob: “I go’d to the new pizza store last night.” Imara: “I love cheese pizza, I want to go, too!” Jacob: “Do you have enough money?” Imara: “I have a quarter!”	

An educator records the number of children who play in each of the learning centers in her environment during one day each week for three weeks. She notices that the dramatic play area gets very few visitors, only 2 per day on average.	
An educator notices that Minh, who is five, struggles with counting quantities greater than four. Observations of Minh show that she can count by rote up to ten but cannot count objects in quantities greater than four consistently.	

Identifying Objective Observations

Objective observations state the facts about what is seen and heard. Subjective notes are based on personal opinions, feelings, or interpretations of what is seen and heard. Choose the objective observation below:

Example A: Leila chose a fiction book about dinosaurs from the bookshelf and sat down in the reading cube. She looked at the pictures for 10 minutes. While she was looking at the pictures, she attempted to sound out the names of several dinosaurs before asking the educator to read the names of the dinosaurs to her. Then, she put the book back in the bookshelf and went over to the block area and picked up 5 dinosaurs and said, "I'm going to build a dinosaur habitat!"	Example B: Leila chose her favorite book about dinosaurs from the bookshelf and happily sat down to read in the reading cube. She enjoyed looking at the pictures for a long time. While she was looking at the pictures, she asked the educator to read the names of the most exciting dinosaurs to her. Then, she put the book back on the bookshelf, chose 5 dinosaurs in her favorite colors, and happily began to build them a home. Leila loves dinosaurs.
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Reflective Practice

- What validated your current teaching beliefs and practices?
- What challenged you or caused you to think in a new way?

- Write down one or two key takeaways from this session.

Assignments

Observe one child at play and collect anecdotal notes of what you observe. As you observe, write down the developmental domains used in the ECIPs and note which indicators are being shown and which are not yet observed. Collect at least three observations of the same child. Please bring your sample lesson plans from Session 2 to use with this Session 4 activity.

Session 4 Overview

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course, engaged participants will:

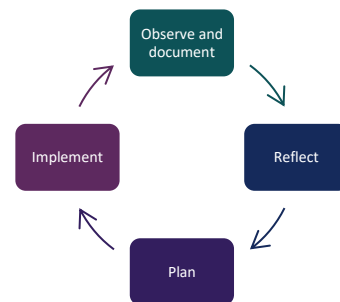
- Demonstrate using authentic assessment data to design or modify curriculum to meet children's unique needs and abilities.
- Explore program enhancements that reflect children's identity, culture, and diversity.

Course Outline:

Section	Section Time	Key Concepts
A	15 minutes	Welcome/Objectives Review Content introduction
B	40 minutes	Designing Meaningful Curriculum Using Authentic Assessment
C	30 minutes	Supporting Children's Context and Culture
D	25 minutes	The Impact of Positive Relationships
E	10 minutes	Objectives Review/Closing
	Total Time: 2 hours	

Assessment Cycle

- Observe and document
- Reflect
- Plan
- Implement



Reflecting on Assessment Data

Educators use questions to guide the process and inform them on how to proceed to the planning and implementation phase of curriculum development.

These questions guide analysis:

- What patterns, skills, or behaviors is the child showing?
- What is the child doing or not yet doing?
- What is this child working on or trying to understand?
- What skills need focused attention?
- What are the children's interests, ideas, and repetitive play topics?
- What does this tell me about the child's developmental progress?

Following the analysis, reflect to understand what the data means and how to proceed by considering:

- What are the next steps in this child's development?
- What activities, interactions, materials, or opportunities should be implemented or added to support these next steps?
- How can children's interests, ideas, and repetitive play topics be used throughout the day?
- How can the environment be changed or enriched to support the children?
- What prior knowledge or experience does the child have that should be considered to support the child's learning?
- How do I ensure the learning environment supports children's cultural context and is reflective of their identities and interests?

Planning Curriculum

- Collaborating with the children to create plans and support them in carrying them out.
- Enriching the learning environment with materials that support children's play and learning.
- Planning opportunities for children to further explore their interests.
- Creating lesson plans that provide targeted activities, experiences, and interactions to support the children's progress as a group or individually.
- Adapting and modifying curriculum to better fit children's needs.

Now and Next Activity, Part I

Observation notes: Sam (age 4) is frequently observed in the writing center working on puzzles. Over the past few weeks, he has shown success in completing puzzles with increasingly more pieces and has graduated from 12 to 24 pieces quickly. Today, he has chosen a 48-piece puzzle. He puts the puzzle on the table, opens the box, and dumps out the pieces. Then, he selects several pieces with similar colors and patterns, and begins rotating them and attempting to make them fit together. After trying to get the same pieces to fit multiple times without success, he pushed the puzzle away, raised his voice, and said, "I can't do it!" Then, put his head down on the table.

Now	Next

Activities, materials, or interactions to support
Sam's Development:

Now and Next Activity, Part II

Your observation:

Now	Next
Activities, materials, or interactions to support this child's development:	

Enriching Environments to Support Identity and Diversity

Reflect the children in your program. How can you enhance your curriculum, including the environment, activities, materials, and interactions, so that they not only see themselves in the program but also gain an appreciation of culture and diversity?

Course Reflection

- What discussions, ideas, or strategies stood out to you during this session? How will you use these key takeaways in your program?
- Look back at your notes and activities in your Participant Guide from the past 4 sessions. List three goals you will implement or changes you will make as a result of this course.

Resources

- [Early Childhood Indicators of Progress \(ECIPs\)](#)
- [NIEER 2025 Policy Brief: How to Choose a Curriculum](#)
- [Help Me Grow MN](#)
- [NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment](#)
- [American Psychological Association Inclusive Language Guide](#)