
Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes: A Summary

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The time is now for our youngest learners

Educators are currently presented with an urgent call and a unique opportunity to ensure that school policies, practices, and strategies for our youngest learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning. The COVID-19 pandemic, for all of its terror, deep sadness, and loss, also provides educators with a unique and essential opportunity to boldly step up and make school a positive and transformative time for children, families, and educators.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COGNITIVE FUNCTIONS GENERALLY PEAKS BY AGE 3 BUT REMAINS ELEVATED UNTIL AROUND AGE 9. THIS UNIQUE DEVELOPMENTAL WINDOW OFFERS TEACHERS VITAL OPPORTUNITIES TO ENSURE THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG CHILDREN ARE OF HIGH QUALITY.

Implement a parallel process

A **Parallel process** is one in which the conditions that are considered desirable for one group are the very same as those established for others. That is, if the goal is for children to be collaborative, creative problem-solvers who are valued for their thoughts, feelings, and ideas, by their teachers and their peers, then the goal is also for adults to be collaborative, creative problem-solvers who are valued for their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

An environment that supports growth for adults and children alike is one:

- in which they feel that they belong and are safe and valued;
- where competence and autonomy develop through relationships built on genuine trust and respect; and
- where excellence is believed possible for each individual and supported to become reality.

Strive for Relatedness, Competency, and Autonomy

Basic Psychological Need Theory (Vansteenkiste, Ryan, & Soenens, 2020): **Relatedness, Competency, and Autonomy** are essential for children and adults to thrive.

- People who feel related to those around them function as productive members of a community. They interact effectively with others, give and accept responsibility, cooperate, have compassion, and show respect.
- Competent people experience success and have opportunities to demonstrate their skill and expertise.
- Autonomous people have a sense of themselves as self-governing and able to effect change.

This concept provides a lens to examine the interactions, practices, and experiences of all members of the school community. It helps determine areas of success and challenge by identifying needs that are not being met, and subsequently guide decisions about how to improve challenging situations.

Use research to guide practice

Educators must base instructional practices on research-based predictors of positive 3rd grade outcomes. Predictors of positive 3rd grade outcomes include:

- scaffolded instruction;
 - oral language development (meaningful communication with adults);
 - collaboration (meaningful communication with peers);
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- vocabulary development;
- mathematics;
- metacognition; and
- small group instruction.

Dill & Boykin, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Veenman, Kok, & Blote, 2005; Chouinard, 2007; Duncan et al., 2007; Mason & Galloway, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2013.

Link a play-based and whole child approach to the education and development of young children

Decades of research tell us that play is an essential part of children’s healthy growth and development. Early childhood experts have long agreed that young children who are provided with rich play-based learning environments excel in all domains of development and learning. Play helps children increase their memory, critical thinking skills, self-regulation, social skills, oral language skills, literacy skills, mathematical and problem-solving skills, and lays the foundation for all academic learning (Elkind, 2007; Gullo, 2006; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019; Yogman, et al., 2018). “Preschool and early elementary students are experiential learners—they learn by doing rather than figuring things out only by thinking about them. This makes shared, physical, play-based activities with educators and peers especially effective opportunities for learning” (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2021).

DECADES OF RESEARCH TELL US THAT PLAY IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF CHILDREN’S HEALTHY GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.

Effective early learning practices are balanced with state and local mandates. Literacy and mathematics are, and should be, part of a child’s daily life. However, young children learn best when literacy and math concepts are integrated into routines and other everyday experiences in fun and meaningful ways that engage all domains of development (e.g., physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and approaches to learning).

The goal is for all young children to experience a child-centered, play-based, high-quality learning environment that is focused on supporting their developmental needs with the resources, space, time, and support they need to connect or re-connect, emotionally and socially, to the world, their peers, teachers, classrooms, and communities.

Let’s get to work: Recommendations for supporting our youngest learners

Innovative approaches using research-based, effective practices for working with young children are critical to supporting our youngest learners as they navigate school in a post-pandemic world. These recommendations are interconnected and intended for administrators and teachers who work with children in preschool, kindergarten, first grade, and beyond.

- Ensure that equity is central to all aspects of practice.
- Use data to inform, guide and monitor progress.
- Use formative assessment process data to guide decision making and inform instruction.
- Use research to guide practice and advocate for young children.
- Ensure alignment of policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices throughout the preschool, kindergarten and first grade years.
- Balance early learning best practices with state and local mandates.
- Collaborate with early learning partners to plan and implement ongoing professional development for early learning educators (i.e., teachers, teacher assistants, administrators).

EQUITY MUST BE FUNDAMENTAL FROM THE BEGINNING!

For more information on this topic, read the full brief, *Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes*, available at: <https://region6cc.org/resources>.