

Prepared by Jobs for the Future for the U.S. Department of Education

High-quality early learning experiences are critical for children’s success later in life. In [A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America](#), the U.S. Department of Education argues that “providing children with quality early education experiences is not only the right thing to do for America’s youngest learners, it’s an imperative for strengthening our nation’s economy.” Unfortunately, too few children are enrolled in any preschool program (only 41 percent) and few of these programs meet high-quality standards¹. This makes access to effective early learning programs an urgent concern, ensuring that children from low-income families, English learners, children with disabilities, and other children have equal access to the stable, nurturing relationships and stimulating learning environments that define high-quality programs.

The purpose of this document is to provide local leaders, policymakers, and practitioners with an overview of the research, best practices, and resources available to stakeholders interested in expanding high-quality early learning programs in their communities. As such, it is not an exhaustive survey of all of the information in the field of early childhood, but it will provide a portal to a range of resources that exist. As you will see below, this guide highlights key components, defines common program models and approaches, and identifies funding opportunities and other resources to inform and support local action around early learning programs.

KEY COMPONENTS OF QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

[Research](#) has identified multiple learning and development domains that are critical to early childhood development, often identified as the period of rapid growth from birth through age eight. These domains, which provide the strong foundation needed for a child’s future development, should be incorporated into early childhood programming from daycare to third-grade:²

- **Social and Emotional Development** includes a child’s behavioral health and development, including the ability to interact and self-regulate. Resulting competencies include self-perception, ability to understand the feelings of others, and to understand and interpret one’s own feelings. 
- **Cognition and General Knowledge** promotes critical thinking, problem solving, and understanding objects and the way the world works. This domain includes mathematical knowledge, early scientific development, abstract thought, and imagination. 

- **Language and Literacy Development** includes communication and emergent literacy capacities, such as listening, speaking, vocabulary, print awareness, story sense, early writing, and connection between letters and sounds. 
- **Physical Well-Being and Motor Development** reflects health status, growth and disabilities, and includes physical capacities such as gross and fine motor skills. 
- **Approaches Toward Learning** describe a child’s disposition to use skills and knowledge and include enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence, as well as utilization of the arts. A child’s approaches to learning contribute to success in school and influence development and learning in other critical domains. 

¹ U.S. Department of Education. 2015. *A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America*. Washington, DC: Author. See page 2. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/early-learning/matter-equity-preschool-america.pdf>

² This section is taken from page 7 of: Preskill, H., N. Jones, and A. Tengue. 2013. *Markers that Matter: Success Indicators in Early Learning and Education*. Boston, MA: FSG. Available at: <http://www.fsg.org/publications/markers-matter>

High-quality early education programs support children’s development across these domains by incorporating multiple evidence-based components for success. In the [2014 Preschool Development Grant solicitation](#) notice, the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services defined a High-Quality Preschool Program as an early learning program that includes the following components at a minimum:³

- High staff qualifications, including a teacher with a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or a bachelor’s degree in any field with a state-approved alternate pathway . . . and teaching assistants with appropriate credentials
- High-quality professional development for all staff
- A child-to-instructional staff ratio of no more than 10 to 1
- A class size of no more than 20 with, at a minimum, one teacher with high staff qualifications
- A full-day program
- Inclusion of children with disabilities to ensure access to and full participation in all opportunities
- Developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive instruction and evidence-based curricula, and learning environments that are aligned with the state Early Learning and Development Standards, for at least the year prior to kindergarten entry
- Individualized accommodations and supports so that all children can access and participate fully in learning activities
- Instructional staff salaries that are comparable to the salaries of local K-12 instructional staff
- Program evaluation to ensure continuous improvement
- On-site or accessible comprehensive services for children and community partnerships that promote families’ access to services that support their children’s learning and development
- Evidence-based health and safety standards.

PROGRAM MODELS FOR EARLY LEARNING

Within the early learning field, there are typically three common program groupings based on the age of the children served: programs for infants and toddlers (birth to age three); preschool programs (ages three to five); and early elementary grades (ages five to eight).

Families with infants and toddlers may participate in home visiting programs and/or home- or center-based childcare. These programs frequently emphasize parenting skills and positive parent-child interactions. [Early Head Start](#) and [The Federal Home Visiting Program](#) are two examples of high-quality programs for infants and toddlers.

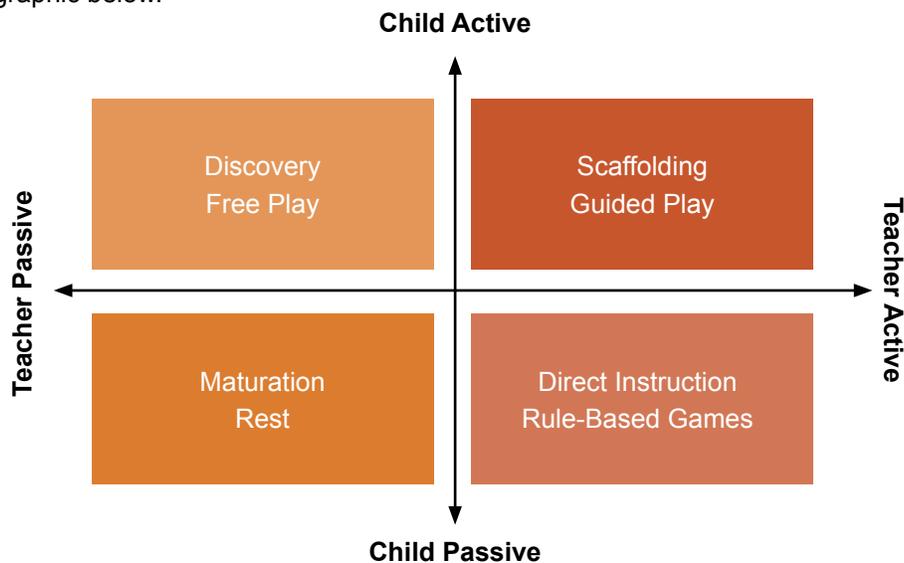
Families with preschool-age children may participate in home- or center-based childcare or preschool education programs in centers or public schools. [Head Start](#) is a federally funded, locally administered program serving preschool-age children and their families. Many states also fund preschool programs, with a strong emphasis on kindergarten readiness. [The State of Preschool Yearbook](#) from the National Institute for Early Education Research is a state-by-state profile of state preschool programs, including information on enrollment, funding, and quality standards.

There is a growing awareness that early learning programs should span the period through third-grade. To help children build a strong academic foundation, preschool through third-grade initiatives (also known as P-3 systems) work to improve coordination and alignment for children transitioning from preschool to K-12 systems. [The Foundation for Child Development](#) has a number of case studies, policy-to-action briefs, and videos for educators and policymakers engaged in preschool to third-grade initiatives.

³ This section is taken from page 48859 of the Federal Register notice: U.S. Department of Education. 2014. Federal Register. Vol. 79, No. 159. Available at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2014/08/18/2014-19426/applications-for-new-awards-preschool-development-grants-development-grants>

Early Learning Approaches

Traditionally, learning through play has been the predominant approach to early childhood education, and this ethos endures. Research findings support the argument that play is integral to early learning, and does not have to be positioned as a dichotomy—play vs. learning. Just as the learners are diverse, so too should be the pedagogy. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests a framework for finding a middle-ground approach to integrate the best of play-based and direct instruction in early education, as shown in the graphic below.



Source: <http://www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-you-can-use-play-vs-learning>

There are multiple evidence-based models that emphasize play-based or individualized learning approaches to promote early childhood development. These models serve a diverse demographic of children, providing a range of options for stakeholders interested in a diverse portfolio of high-quality options in their community. Leading models include:

- **Montessori:** Programs following the Montessori Method are defined by “multiage groupings that foster peer learning, uninterrupted blocks of work time, and guided choice of work activity [with] specially designed Montessori learning materials.”⁴
- **Waldorf:** Waldorf programs “integrate the arts in all academic disciplines . . . to enhance and enrich learning [and] inspire lifelong learning in all students.”⁵
- **Reggio Emilia:** The Reggio Emilia approach is defined by “collegial and relational-based provocative experiences; the importance accredited to environments and spaces; intense co-participation of families; affirmation of competencies in children and adults; educational documentation; and listening.”⁶
- **Bank Street:** The Bank Street “approach recognizes that children learn best when they are actively engaged both intellectually and emotionally with materials, ideas, and people.”⁷
- **High Scope:** Programs following the High Scope approach use an “active participatory learning” framework structured around a “plan-do-review” sequence that engages children in planning activities, participating in hands-on play and learning experiences, and reviewing what was done and learned through those activities.”⁸

⁴ <http://amshq.org/Montessori-Education/Introduction-to-Montessori> ⁵ https://waldorfeducation.org/waldorf_education

⁶ <http://reggioalliance.org/reggio-emilia/infant-toddler/> ⁷ <https://www.bankstreet.edu/graduate-school/about-graduate-school>

⁸ <http://highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=291>

Funding for Early Learning

Funding for early childhood services is available through an array of federal and state funding streams and government agencies. The following are some [quick facts](#) about early childhood services and some of the funding streams that support these services.

- Most federal funds are granted to state agencies to provide statewide services. Some federal funding is provided directly to local public and private entities.
- Federal and state funding for child care services is also provided directly to parents via the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#) and the [Child and Dependent Care Credit](#).
- Some states have established [business tax credits](#) to support child care providers directly. There are also tax credits available for businesses that sponsor child care for their employees.
- The U.S. Department of Education funds public and private entities (schools and child care programs) to provide early learning services to children in low-income families through [Preschool Development Grants](#). The department also provides funding for programs serving young children with disabilities through the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Parts B \(Section 619\) and C](#). The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#), signed into law in December 2015, includes additional early childhood funding opportunities.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies through the [Head Start](#) and [Early Head Start](#) programs to provide early learning services to children in low-income families, including [home visiting programs](#). The department also funds the [Child Care and Development Block Grant](#) (formerly the Child Care and Development Fund or CCDF) that provides funding for child care to allow low-income parents to participate in work or education and training programs.
- The [Family and Child Education](#) (FACE) program in the Bureau of Indian Education serves children prenatal to age five, integrating language and cultural development in home and school settings.
- Federal funds are also available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide nutritious meals and snacks to children in child care programs. Approximately 3.3 million children receive nutritious meals and snacks through the [Child and Adult Care Food Program](#) each year.
- A recent [report](#) by the Education Commission of the States found that 32 states increased their investments in early childhood education in 2015-2016, for a total of about \$767 million in new state investments.
- The [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) publishes annually [The State of Preschool Yearbook](#) which details preschool programs by state, with information on funding, quality standards and other policies, access, and performance.

The Evidence Base for Early Learning

There is a great deal of research about early learning and development. A sample of recent studies, briefs, and reports from leading experts in the field is provided below.

Early Learning Indicators

The following research demonstrates that high-quality early learning experiences are critical for future success:

- [Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education](#)
- [Markers that Matter: Success Indicators in Early Learning and Education](#)
- [Primary Early Care and Education Arrangements and Achievement at Kindergarten Entry](#)
- Reports on [Early Education](#) from The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine
- Reports on [social-emotional development](#) from [Child Trends](#)
- [Science at the Center: An Emergent, Standards-Based, Child-Centered Framework for Early Learners](#)
- [What Works for Reducing Problem Behaviors in Early Childhood](#)

Nationally and State-Recognized Standards in Early Learning

- NAEYC has established 10 [standards](#) for high-quality early learning environments.
- The Council for Exceptional Children's [Division for Early Childhood](#) has developed a [Recommended Practices](#) guide for improving learning outcomes for young children with disabilities.
- The 2015 [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework](#) defines what children should learn and be able to do from birth through the age of five.
- States also define [early learning standards and guidelines](#) for children up to age eight.

- A growing number of states have also developed [kindergarten entry assessments](#) to help identify kindergarten readiness gaps for teachers and families.

Benefit-Cost Analyses

These studies examine the benefits and costs of early learning investments and find that these investments result in significant benefits to children, families, and society:

- [The Benefits and Costs of Investing in Early Childhood Education](#)
- [Early Childhood Education for Low-Income Students: A Review of the Evidence and Benefit Cost Analysis](#)

Federal and State Policy

These publications report on and examine early learning policies and trends at the federal and state level:

- [A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America](#)
- [Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#)
- [Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings](#)
- [Policy Statement on Family Engagement from the Early Years to the Early Grades](#)
- [Policy Statement on Supporting the Development of Children Who Are Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Programs](#)
- [The Research Base for a Birth through Age Eight State Policy Framework](#)
- The [Child Care/Early Ed Update](#) from the Center for Law and Social Policy tracks early learning issues

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following links provide additional resources on early learning, including the importance of early literacy, research-based practices, federal resources, tools for parents and educators, and national organizations promoting early learning policies and best practices.

Comprehensive Websites and Resources

- [Early Beginnings: Early Literacy Knowledge and Instruction](#)
- [The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center](#)
- [IES Research Network to Improve Early Childhood Education](#)
- [Promising Practices Network](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education Early Learning](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education Early Learning Technical Assistance](#)

Head Start and Early Head Start

- [Head Start Programs](#)
- [Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center](#)
- [National Head Start Association](#)
- [Office of Head Start](#)
- [Early Head Start Program](#)
- [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework](#)

Tools for Educators and Parents

- [Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade](#)
- [National Center on Parent, Family & Community Engagement \(HHS\)](#)
- [Zero to Three](#)

National Organizations

- [The Center for Law and Social Policy \(CLASP\)](#)
- [Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes \(CEELO\)](#)
- [Foundation for Child Development](#)
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#)
- [National Institute for Early Education Research \(NIEER\)](#)

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