

# Pursuing NAEYC Accreditation: Teachers' Perspectives

**T**he process of earning NAEYC Accreditation of Programs for Young Children brings improvements that benefit the early childhood education program as a whole. It also results in positive changes on a smaller scale for individual teachers. Strengthening their lesson plans and finding inspiration to move ahead in their own careers are some of the ways teachers say they have been affected by the NAEYC Accreditation process.

Michelle Crespín, a teacher at the Christina Kent Early Childhood Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, initially viewed the accreditation project as a sideline to her real job—teaching 4- and 5-year-olds. Instead, she has found that it changed her overall perspective on how she interacts with the children. “Your whole attitude [about teaching] changes,” Crespín says. “Everything you say and do is shaping what the children are going to be. They are so open-minded.”

Inspired by NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standard 8, which focuses on connecting programs with the community, Crespín took the children on a field trip to a nearby elementary school this year to help prepare the rising kindergartners for the future. She thought that visiting a kindergarten classroom and meeting the teachers and children would help the preschoolers be less anxious when they make the transition to school.

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## Strengths and weaknesses defined

Some teachers report that concentrating on the NAEYC standards and criteria highlights the areas of their teaching that need more attention. Sandy Stout, a pre-K teacher at the University Presbyterian Children’s Center in San Antonio, Texas, says she found that she was doing a good job of supporting children’s early literacy and math development. She realized she needed to push herself outside her comfort zone and “focus a little more on science and social studies.” Stout says, “I think for a teacher this is a great chance to look back over your curriculum and activities and examine your strengths and weaknesses.”

Earning NAEYC Accreditation can also offer teachers solid confirmation that

their practices are on target in terms of current research and what early childhood experts recommend. “It gives you such a boost,” says Debra Ardry, who teaches a combined 3- and 4-year-olds class at one of three Sarah Ward Day Nursery schools in Newark, New Jersey.

Teachers say, however, that they have to be careful not to let the drive toward accreditation overshadow their day-to-day mission, serving the children in their care and their families. They have to learn to integrate into their daily teaching practice the knowledge they acquire while pursuing accreditation. “I think at first teachers were so worried about getting the right activities out on the table and snapping the right picture for the portfolio that we were not as interactive as we should have been,” Stout says. “However, we took a

step back to remember that the children come first, and we got back on track.”

In fact, the reflective practice and documentation required in Self-Study and Self-Assessment work best when they are used to support teachers’ ongoing work and not imposed on teachers as an added burden to their already busy days.

## Future professional aspirations

As they have gained more insight into improving their classrooms, several teachers say they also see more clearly how they want to advance in the profession. During the accreditation process, more teachers begin to take advantage of opportunities for professional development and continuing education.

Crespin, who started her early childhood education career as a family child care provider, has grown more interested in working with children who have special needs as she has learned more about Standard 1, the Relationships Standard, which focuses on making sure all children in the classroom feel like they belong. When a child with autism joined her class, Crespin initially thought accommodating the young child would be difficult. But she has found that she can meet the challenge and that the rest of the children benefit by getting to know the child and learning to adapt to her needs and include her in their play. And Stout, who originally envisioned becoming a high school teacher, wants to eventually move into higher education so she can “teach adults the importance of the work in early childhood.”

## A team approach

Even when teachers have their own goals for their classrooms or careers, they are also part of a community that must work together to reach NAEYC Accreditation standards. Teachers and others on staff, however, don’t always jump wholeheartedly into the process, directors say.

“When we first received the Self-Study Kit, we were overwhelmed,” admits Sharlie Barber, the early childhood director at the I.J. and Jeanne

Wagner Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Salt Lake City. Teachers often don’t immediately see how they can take on even one more responsibility on top of preparing activities, communicating with families, and teaching and caring for the children in their class every day. As a result, programs find that they must strategize to get the staff to collaborate and to blend the accreditation process into the work staff already do.

“A teacher cannot do it alone,” notes Cindi Catlin, the director at University Presbyterian Children’s Center. She found it helpful to identify natural leaders who were eager to start the process in their own classrooms. She then encouraged them to serve as a resource for the rest of the staff or to partner with another teacher who needed some direction. Opportunities to blend socializing with work can help. Teachers at Catlin’s center held some evening portfolio pizza parties to build a collegial atmosphere.

John Rich, the director of the three Sarah Ward Day Nursery sites in Newark, said being an enthusiastic leader is necessary for keeping the staff focused on reaching the goal. “If I’m excited, then the teachers are excited,” he says. All three programs, which are part of the Abbott preschool program in New Jersey, have been through or are

going through the NAEYC Accreditation process.

In her JCC center, Barber began weaving a discussion of the standards and criteria into each staff meeting to build understanding among the teachers. The parent advisory committee got involved in the process, and parents volunteered in the classrooms to allow teachers some time to compile materials. Teachers also teamed up with colleagues who teach the same age children. This allowed them to brainstorm ideas and “get excited about the process together,” adds Barber. “It was an amazing opportunity to work together for a common goal. ‘We’re All in This Together’ became our new theme song.”

Directors note that the close-knit relationships that develop during the quest for NAEYC Accreditation don’t fade once accreditation is awarded. “Working together and sharing experiences helped [the staff] develop an awareness beyond the four walls of their classrooms,” Catlin says. “Each classroom and every staff member plays a role in the accreditation of a program and its success in working with children and families.”

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