

Preface

When Ann Epstein first authored *The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies for Young Children's Learning*, she addressed a critical and timely question in early childhood education: How can educators purposefully and effectively teach content to young children in ways that respect their development, curiosity, and individuality? The result was a foundational text that has guided countless educators in their work, challenging us all to reflect on our practices and embrace the role of intentionality in teaching.

As a preschool teacher when the first two editions were published, I found Ann's vision deeply inspiring. Her thoughtful approach to balancing child-guided and adult-guided learning shaped my practice and helped me create environments where children's curiosity and wonder could flourish. Over time, her work became a cornerstone of my professional journey—from teaching young children to facilitating professional learning and guiding early childhood leaders. It is with immense gratitude for her foundational vision that I approached the task of editing this third edition.

So why a new edition of *The Intentional Teacher*? Since the revised edition was published in 2014, advances in education research have expanded our understanding of how children learn and develop, in particular how they engage in deeper content learning than previously thought possible. For example, they tackle higher-level thinking and problem solving in math. They engage in scientific inquiry and thoughtful storytelling as they develop their language and literacy skills. Alongside these developments, our understanding of developmentally appropriate practices has been enhanced by the increasing recognition of the influence of children's cultures on development and learning, inequities in educational opportunities, and the power of curriculum and practices that are meaningful to learners' social and cultural norms, values, and experiences to enable all children to succeed. This third edition reflects these changes while remaining true to the core principles and approach laid out by Ann Epstein.

In this edition, I have had the privilege of working with a team of contributing authors, all experts in their content areas, who bring unique perspectives and specialized knowledge to each chapter. Their contributions have enriched this text with updated strategies and practices that support higher-order thinking, engage children in meaningful and thought-provoking ways, and honor the cultural and linguistic diversity of the young learners in today's early childhood programs. Together, these contributors and I aimed to provide educators with tools to create joyful, inclusive, and curiosity-driven learning environments that offer content-rich experiences where all children can thrive.

The Origins of Intentional Teaching

Questions about the best ways to teach young children are hardly new. As Ann Epstein noted in previous editions of the book, the debate around early childhood instruction often contrasts the extremes of child-initiated learning (where the teacher has a passive role) with those of adult-directed instruction (where children have a passive role and teachers use scripted lessons). Her work offered an essential alternative: a *both/and* approach in which both children and adults play active roles in the learning process.

A guiding principle of this book is that child-guided and adult-guided experiences each “work best for different kinds of learning, and elements of both can be combined effectively” (NAEYC 2022, 7), creating rich, meaningful learning opportunities for young children. For example, children’s self-directed play offers many opportunities for teachers to observe and promote learning, and teachers also set goals and plan instructional activities that are based not only on children’s interests but also on other knowledge and skills that children need to develop, often articulated in early learning standards.

This book continues to advocate for a thoughtful, intentional approach that uses both child-guided and adult-guided learning experiences. As previous editions did, it supports teachers to consider current theory and research, their knowledge of each child and their context, and their own professional knowledge and expertise to discern when and how to provide each type of learning experience.

This Book’s Objectives

The first objective of this edition of *The Intentional Teacher* is to reflect the evolving understanding of early curriculum content and effective teaching strategies since the previous edition. While this edition continues to highlight approaches to rigorous content learning with young children that are grounded in developmentally appropriate practices, it also reflects the field’s deepened understanding of how young children learn specific concepts, what content seems to be the most meaningful in the preschool years, and how best to support early learning as a foundation for all future learning. For example, in areas such as science, research continues to refine our understanding of how children develop foundational skills and how educators can foster inquiry and conceptual understanding.

This edition emphasizes strategies that integrate children’s prior knowledge, strengths, and curiosity while promoting higher-order thinking and meaningful connections across subject areas. In support of this focus on robust content learning, the book offers ideas and strategies for engaging children in key subject areas through intentional, research-informed interactions.

The second objective is to expand on the integration of principles of equity and practices that reflect the strengths and experiences of children as central to intentional teaching practice. When educators create inclusive environments that weave children's knowledge and experiences into the activities and daily routines of the program, they ensure that every child feels valued and empowered to learn.

Finally, this edition seeks to inspire educators to reflect on their own practice, discover or rediscover effective approaches for teaching subject matter, and embrace the rewards of intentional teaching. There is nothing more fulfilling than witnessing a child's excitement as they master a new skill or explore a new idea. By fostering this excitement and curiosity, we ensure that learning is not only meaningful but also joyful for both children and teachers.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized into two main parts. The first two chapters lay out the meaning of intentional teaching. Chapter 1 introduces the concept and explains the rationale for promoting children's learning of knowledge and skills through both child-guided and adult-guided experiences. Chapter 2 discusses evidence-based practices for creating developmentally appropriate learning environments that support teachers to engage children with content. It has been expanded to delve deeper into the important role of the social and cultural contexts of children, families, and educators in teaching and learning, emphasizing the importance of knowing and valuing each child.

The second part of the book delves into curriculum areas, addressing intentional teaching strategies in eight domains and content areas: approaches to learning, social and emotional learning, physical development and health, language and literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and creative arts. Each of these chapters begins with an overview of the area and then identifies the knowledge and skills in that area that children seem to acquire primarily through child-guided or adult-guided learning experiences. Throughout the chapters, readers get practical strategies, illustrative examples, and reflective questions to encourage their professional growth and inspire new approaches to teaching. The book concludes with Chapter 11, which offers guiding principles for intentional teaching and reflects on the joy and fulfillment that come from fostering young children's learning. The reference list can be accessed online at NAEYC.org/intentional-teacher-third-edition.

New Features and Advancements in This Edition

This third edition introduces several new features that reflect the field's growing emphasis on equity, cultural responsiveness, and advancing evidence-based practices in early childhood education:

- › Role of contributing authors: As mentioned, each chapter is enriched by the expertise of contributing authors who bring fresh perspectives and specialized knowledge to their respective areas. These authors ensure the book reflects the latest research and innovative practices.

- › Connecting teaching to children’s lives: A new feature embedded in Chapters 3–10 highlights practical examples of how educators incorporate strategies that are developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate for children. These vignettes showcase ways to honor children’s social and cultural contexts, integrate family and community values, and create inclusive learning environments.
- › Advancements in each domain: While the structure of the curriculum chapters remains consistent with previous editions, the content has been updated to reflect new research. For example, strategies in mathematics focus on fostering problem solving and critical thinking, and updates in creative arts emphasize the role of cultural expression and representation.
- › Integration of joy in teaching and learning: This edition intentionally celebrates the joy of teaching by emphasizing the rewards for both teachers and children of environments where children’s excitement and curiosity flourish. I hope that this book reminds educators of the transformative power of intentional teaching to inspire lifelong learning.



It has been a privilege to edit this third edition of *The Intentional Teacher* and collaborate with the experienced professionals who have contributed their expertise to it. My hope is that this book inspires you to reflect on your practice, embrace new ideas, broaden your thinking about children’s content learning, and find renewed joy in creating learning environments that encourage children to explore, question, and discover. By engaging intentionally and responsively with children to promote their learning, we not only help them grow but also remind ourselves of the transformative power of teaching.

—Amy Schmidtke