Early Childhood Program Standards

Supporting Evidence

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The Early Childhood Program Standards are developed with and for early childhood educators and are based upon the current early childhood education research evidence-base. This document outlines the supporting evidence for each of the nine standards of the position statement. The "Early Childhood Program Standards" position statement works with other important NAEYC documents to help educators and systems leaders (1) define developmentally appropriate practice, (2) set professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators, (3) outline a professional code of ethics, and (4) work toward advancing equity. These five foundational position statements are grounded in NAEYC's core values and vision.

STANDARD 1

Relationships: Creating a Caring and Equitable Community of Learners

> **Supporting positive relationships with each child and family in ways that promote individual children's self worth**

At the heart of a caring and equitable community of learners are positive relationships between and among early childhood educators, children, and families (Wright 2022). Early relationships are powerful predictors of a wide array of later outcomes (IOM & NRC, 2015; Helburn 1995; Howes & Smith 1995; Howes et al. 1995; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001). Teachers and administrators who respond promptly and sensitively to children; express warmth; encourage and model appropriate expressions of emotion; provide a secure base from which to explore the social, physical, and intellectual environment; and tailor their responses and interactions to the personalities, needs, and developmental level of individual children contribute positively to the quality of children's experiences while in early education settings (Honig 2002; Howes & Ritchie 2002; Velasquez et al. 2013). They can assist young children in becoming part of groups, learning to cooperate and share with others, following rules, acting responsibly, and solving problems together (Katz & McClellan 1997). Over time, children experience and express a growing range of emotions and become able to understand their own and other's feelings (Tominey et al. 2017). Affirming children's cultures and languages and intentionally promoting positive racial/ethnic identity development is critical to forming secure adult-child relationships, and to ensuring a sense of community and belonging for all (White & Wanless 2019).

> **Taking action to foster a sense of belonging as part of a caring community of learners**

Children learn and develop best in caring, equitable communities where all participants consider and contribute to one another's well-being and learning, and where they are valued for their strengths. When applied to early childhood education, equity is the practice of viewing each child as an individual and customizing one's treatment of them to increase access and remove barriers to resources (Beneke et al. 2019; Booker 2021). In equitable communities, children see themselves and each other reflected and respected (Petriwskyj 2010). Educators can organize indoor and outdoor spaces, furnishings, equipment, and materials to maximize learning opportunities and engagement for every child and ensure that all children, families, and the broader community are reflected. Even the intentionality involved in creating a consistent but flexible daily schedule can support children's health, safety, social and emotional regulation and encourage active learning through exploration and play (Katz & McClellan 1997; Stone 2001; Ritchie 2003). Supporting a child's holistic development goes beyond academic skills; it includes cultivating a deep sense of belonging where children feel safe, valued, and heard in their learning environment (Pope & Miles 2022). Establishing this sense of belonging forms the emotional foundation upon which all meaningful learning rests (Midgen et al. 2019; Osterman 2023). When children know they are valued members of their community, they gain the confidence to trust others, interact freely, and fully engage with peers and educators (Osterman 2023). This belonging is directly related to children's motivation to learn and take intellectual and creative risks—necessary steps toward exploring and understanding the complex world around them (Little & Stapleton 2023; NASEM 2018).

Centering children's and families' cultural values, integrating their home languages/dialects/communication needs

Intentional teachers and administrators affirm identities in positive ways that do not negatively impact other identities (Pang et al. 2000; Souto-Manning 2013; Howard 2018). Educators honor the perspectives, experiences, and realities of children and their families from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds (Moll 2006; Gonzalez-Mena 2008). This recognition enables programs to fully embrace the concept of "funds of knowledge" as a guiding principle, where educators make a conscious effort to learn more about and incorporate the everyday lived experiences of children and their families into the school culture (González 2006). Funds of knowledge can be successfully implemented when educators work closely with families to bridge the gap between a child's early learning setting and home life, ensuring that children feel seen, heard, and valued. Additionally, the benefits of experiential learning are fully realized when children can connect what they learn in early learning settings to their own lives, making learning relevant and meaningful through lived experiences backed by real-world knowledge. Learning about the cultural diversity of families and the community through recognizing holidays, traditions, and festivals from different cultures is a powerful way to foster respect and understanding. These celebrations, when integrated into classroom activities and cultural presentations by families and community members, provide a rich, inclusive learning environment (Halgunseth 2009; Durden et al. 2015).

Identifying and addressing potential biases that exist within the staff and program structures

Biases can manifest in various ways, spanning race, gender, ethnicity, language, and cultural backgrounds. Teachers' biases and beliefs can impact how they treat children (Blackson et al. 2022). When unconscious biases go unaddressed, they can perpetuate inequalities by shaping perceptions that influence interactions and decision making (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity 2015). For instance, biases related to race often lead to Black children and other children of color being unfairly subjected to negative assumptions that affect adult-child relationships (Gilliam et al. 2016; Epstein et al. 2017; Marcelo & Yates 2019). Biases related to gender and ability can shape expectations for children's behavior and academic performance, often reinforcing stereotypes that restrict their opportunities to thrive (Brown & Stone 2016; Park et al. 2021; Gillborn et al. 2012). Linguistic and cultural biases also have a significant impact, as children and families who speak languages other than English or come from diverse cultural backgrounds may experience marginalization, limiting their inclusion and access to equitable opportunities in educational environments (Gay 2010). These biases significantly affect relationships and children's outcomes (Tatum 2003; Derman-Sparks 2011) and can result in harsher treatment, reduced empathy, and limited access to support necessary for their growth and development. Addressing these biases is essential in promoting equitable opportunities and experiences for all children and their families. This approach begins with raising awareness among staff about the ways unconscious biases can shape their interactions, decision making, and perceptions of the children and families they serve. Through professional development and focused training sessions, reflections, and policy reviews, the program provides staff with practical tools to identify and address these biases, creating a more inclusive and equitable environment (Derman-Sparks et al. 2015).

STANDARD 2

Families and Community: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections

Developing reciprocal relationships with each child's family responsive to culture, language, and individual needs

Strong reciprocal partnerships between educators, families, and community members enrich children's learning experiences by ensuring that early childhood education is responsive to their cultural, linguistic, and individual needs (Hong 2011; York 2016). Children's development does not happen in isolation—their families play an essential role in shaping their early learning experiences, perspectives, and interactions. Acknowledging and valuing family diversity is critical, as families come from varied cultural, racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, each of which influences their expectations of early childhood education, parenting practices, and engagement with program staff (Baquedano-López et al. 2013; Reid et al. 2017).

To build effective partnerships, educators must take the time to learn about and understand families' linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. These factors shape their child-rearing beliefs, educational goals, and engagement practices, which in turn influence how children experience early learning settings (Nasir et al. 2006; Paris & Alim 2017; Paredes et al. 2020). Programs that actively listen to families, respect their perspectives, and integrate their insights into practices create inclusive and affirming environments where children feel supported both at home and in school.

Early childhood programs can enhance children's experiences and development by deepening connections with families and fostering meaningful community relationships (Allen 2007; NASEM 2016). This involves open, two-way communication, inviting families to share their knowledge, traditions, and values while also providing opportunities for them to actively engage in their child's learning.

Continuously engaging children's families as vital members of the learning community

Families play a critical role in their children's learning, and ongoing engagement with families strengthens the foundation of a child's development. Developing respectful, ongoing partnerships with children, their families, and the broader community enhances learning and wellbeing (Iruka et al. 2015). Children's homes, communities, and early learning settings work together as interconnected environments, shaping a child's experiences and opportunities for growth (Christakis 2016; McDevitt & Ormond 2020).

The key to building strong, reciprocal relationships with families is fostering two-way communication that is consistent, meaningful, and empowers families as active participants in their children's education (Steen 2023; Ramsey 2015). When early childhood programs take a purposeful approach to engaging families, they create an inclusive environment where families feel valued, respected, and seen as partners in their child's learning journey. Educators who actively engage families create a collaborative network that reinforces learning beyond the classroom, helping children feel supported in all aspects of their lives. By integrating family voices into program planning, curriculum design, and decision-making, early learning programs become stronger, more inclusive, and better equipped to meet the diverse needs of children and families.

Working to be a positive member of the larger community

Building strong connections between early learning programs, families, and community resources enhances the quality of education and strengthens support systems for children and families (Bryant et al. 1999). A community-centered approach bridges gaps in resources, ensuring that families have access to essential services such as health care, mental health support, social services, and enrichment programs. Educators and administrators play a pivotal role in community-building by connecting families with resources, fostering peer networks, and developing collaborative relationships with local organizations (Dunst et al. 2007; Iruka et al. 2015). Effective programs do more than educate—they serve as community hubs, providing resources, support, and a sense of belonging for families. Through networking, professional collaboration, and shared learning experiences, programs enhance their capacity to meet the needs of the families they serve.

Drawing upon community resources (including both funds of knowledge and financial resources) to support program goals

Communities offer valuable cultural knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences that can enrich early learning environments and support holistic child development (Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The early learning environment itself serves as a micro-community, where children explore roles, relationships, and responsibilities within a structured yet dynamic environment (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

When educators bridge the gap between the early learning program and home life, children feel seen, valued, and supported in their learning. Educators who intentionally incorporate children's cultural backgrounds, home languages, and community experiences into their teaching practices foster a sense of belonging and identity among children (González, 2006). This approach aligns with the concept of funds of knowledge, which recognizes that families and communities hold rich cultural, historical, and practical knowledge that should be integrated into early learning experiences. Programs can further strengthen their impact by encouraging families to connect with one another, forming networks of support that extend beyond the early childhood program. Additionally, leveraging community partnerships, funding opportunities, and local expertise enriches both teaching and learning while also strengthening ties between early learning programs and the neighborhoods they serve. Through these efforts, programs can create vibrant, resource-rich environments that support children's growth and contribute to their understanding of the world around them.

Curriculum: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Meet Meaningful Goals

Using a curriculum based on current research to support children's development and learning

Using a curriculum grounded in current research is essential to fostering children's development and learning across all domains. Research underscores the importance of a curriculum that is engaging, intentional, and responsive, ensuring that children are active participants in their learning process (Greenberg, 1993; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1999; NASEM, 2024). High-quality curricula incorporate rich and meaningful content that prioritizes children's agency, encouraging exploration, curiosity, and independent thinking while also promoting collaborative learning experiences (DeVries et al. 2002). Furthermore, a strong curriculum should have a research-backed scope and sequence that aligns with established learning trajectories, supporting children's development in a progressive and coherent manner (NASEM 2024; Greenberg 1993). Demonstrated effectiveness is key—curricula must be shown to produce positive learning outcomes across cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development domains, reinforcing their value in early childhood education (DeVries et al. 2002; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003). By integrating these evidence-based components, an early learning curriculum can effectively support the whole child, setting a strong foundation for lifelong learning (Masterson, 2022).

Using a curriculum that includes developmentally appropriate goals, a scope and sequence aligned with research in appropriate content areas, and rich content to guide teachers in all areas of development and content areas (literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts)

The design, content, and implementation of an early childhood curriculum or learning approach is one of the most significant components of high-quality programming (Masterson, 2022). Children learn more in programs where there is a well-planned and implemented curriculum or learning approach with meaningful exposure to academic content and a variety of instructional formats for children to gain understanding (Fuller et al. 2017; Markowitz & Ansari 2020). An effective curriculum should offer well-designed, structured learning experiences that integrate intentional and responsive teaching practices, ensuring that educators can adapt to the evolving needs of their students (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003). A comprehensive curriculum or learning approach is holistic, extending well beyond traditional school readiness skills, such as letter, number, shape, and color recognition, to areas that are related to social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive development, with an emphasis on play (Katz & McClellan 1997; Hyson 2003). High-quality programs, relying on theory and research on child development (Berk & Winsler 1995; DeVries et al. 2002; Zigler et al. 2004), introduce and explore these areas of curriculum with an emphasis on play, child-initiation and choice, and interaction with other people and materials as the core of children's learning. Formative assessments play a crucial role in this process, allowing educators to tailor instruction to each child's unique strengths and areas for growth, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches (NASEM 2024).

Using a curriculum that is culturally and linguistically responsive and reflective, builds on children's strengths, respects their cultural backgrounds, and supports their identities and home languages

A well-designed curriculum should acknowledge and honor the diverse experiences of all children, ensuring that learning is both meaningful and inclusive. A curriculum or learning approach that is sensitive to children's developmental capabilities and backgrounds, addresses multiple domains of development, and views children as active participants in the learning process has been shown to promote long-term academic success (Stipek et al. 1995; Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; Bowman et al. 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001; Lee & Burkam 2002; Marcon 2002). Additionally, cultural and linguistic responsiveness plays a critical role in ensuring that all children—regardless of their racial, ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds—have equitable access to high-quality education (Roopnarine & Johnson 1999; NASEM 2024). Despite the growing recognition of the need for culturally and linguistically responsive curricula, there remains a lack of commercially available curricula explicitly designed to meet the needs of Black, Indigenous, Latino/a, and other children of color, multilingual learners, children living in poverty, and children with disabilities (NASEM 2024). Given this gap, it is crucial that existing curricula be adapted to reflect the lived experiences, languages, and strengths of diverse children and families. Intentional curriculum adaptation—rather than a one-size-fits-all approach—ensures

that each and every child receives meaningful, affirming, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Escayg 2020). By centering cultural and linguistic diversity in curriculum design and implementation, early learning programs can create inclusive and engaging environments where all children feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

STANDARD 4

Teaching: Teaching to Enhance Each Child's Development and Learning

Using teaching practices that are nurturing and inclusive

Young children benefit from learning environments in which educators are nurturing and responsive (NASEM 2023; Masterson 2022; Biglan et al. 2012). Designing the program so that all children have access, can participate, and can demonstrate progress is the foundation for the full inclusion of every child. Nurturing environments are fostered by educators who offer children positive behavior guidance that promotes their socioemotional development and well-being without harsh discipline, such as expulsions and suspensions. When children with disabilities receive their special education services in inclusive settings with nondisabled peers, both groups of children benefit developmentally and socially (Strogilos et al. 2020; Fisher & Meyer 2002). Creating an inclusive and supportive environment fosters a sense of belonging and safety for educators, children, and their families. These environments enable the formation of strong, responsive relationships that are critical to a child's social and emotional development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007; Pianta et al. 2008). To achieve this, programs must adopt inclusive teaching practices that acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of children's backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. Such practices include differentiated instruction and the use of accessible materials to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children, ensuring that each child feels seen, supported, and empowered to succeed (Odom et al. 2011). Consistent routines and procedures also strengthen children's competence. Many valuable learning opportunities occur in daily routines such as arrival and departure, cleanup, hand washing, meals and snacks, and transitions (Fuligni 2012). Educators support children as they plan and talk about activities ahead of time and, afterward, discuss which strategies worked well.

Equipping educators to support each and every child's development and learning through individualized and intentional practices

Highly skilled teachers with the skills to individualize experiences are needed to maximize children's learning. Vital to young children's learning, development, and agency is having significant periods of time to choose what to do and, together with other children, initiate and direct their own activities (Erwin et al. 2016). Young children also benefit from direct instruction for skills such as early literacy and numeracy (Lunga et al. 2022). The most effective learning experiences build on children's strengths and what they already know and encourage them to stretch toward a new level of achievement (Gillespie et al. 2017). Viewing children as the constructors of their own knowledge, effective teachers fill the learning environment with opportunities for children to choose and explore meaningful activities (Goble & Pianta 2017). Educators intentionally select materials, tools, and technology (if applicable) with discretion to ensure approaches support children's specific learning and development needs. A great deal of curriculum planning involves mapping out content objectives, individualization for the group and for specific children, providing opportunities for children to have agency and make choices, and preparing materials and strategies for effective teaching. Teaching young children is a dynamic activity; teachers who can gauge shifts in children's needs and coordinate their level of involvement support the development of autonomy along with social and foundational skills (Bardack & Obradović 2019).

Using teaching practices that are culturally affirming and linguistically responsive to the children being served

Historically, the identities, language(s)/dialects, and cultures of children who are Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, Asian, and other children of color, as well as those with disabilities, have been excluded from learning environments and instruction. As a result, it is important to embed these children's identities, languages, and cultures explicitly and consistently in their learning environments and instruction (Gay 2013). Effective teachers build on the cultural and linguistic assets of children and honor their many ways of learning and communicating to empower their success (Gay 2010; Paris & Alim 2014; Howard 2018). Effective educators foster responsive learning environments through positive, rich language interactions that allow children to be heard and develop their communication skills (Larson et al. 2020). Children in rich language environments have teachers who engage them in back-and-forth conversations, model vocabulary and sentences, and expand their utterances (Larson et al. 2020).

Supporting learning through play and hands-on activities

Purposeful, meaningful, and child-initiated play is a key element of high-quality early childhood curricula and learning approaches, fostering engagement and deeper understanding (Bowman et al. 2001; Zigler et al. 2004). Decades of child development research has documented the critical role of play in children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, highlighting its importance across multiple domains of development (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2020; Howes & Smith 1995; DeVries et al. 2002; Elias & Berk 2002; Roskos & Christie 2004). Children thrive when teachers actively support play-based learning, following their lead to create meaningful learning opportunities, enhancing play choices, and providing individualized support and challenges based on real-time interactions (Pyle et al. 2017). In developmentally appropriate early childhood environments, play is characterized by choice, wonder, and delight, fostering curiosity and exploration as children interact with peers and participate in engaging experiences (Pedagogy of Play Research Team 2016). Additionally, the nature of teacher-child interactions plays a pivotal role in shaping children's learning experiences. Educators who intentionally scaffold play, model new skills, and extend children's thinking help to deepen their understanding and engagement in learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2020; Berk & Winsler 1995; Katz & McClellan 1997; Stipek et al. 1998; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001; DeVries et al. 2002; Howes & Ritchie 2002; Worth & Grollman 2003). By embracing play as a learning tool, educators create rich, hands-on learning environments that support children's holistic development and foster a lifelong love of learning (Masterson 2022).

STANDARD 5

Assessment: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning

Using an ongoing mix of formal and informal assessment to monitor children's development and learning to guide instruction

Assessment is a systematic, ongoing means of observing, collecting, and documenting information about children's learning and development to monitor children's progress toward learning goals, to make curriculum decisions, and to improve teaching practices (Pretti-Frontczak et al. 2002; NRC 2008; Snyder et al. 2014; Scott-Little, with Reschke 2022). The assessment process involves multiple steps: (1) gathering information about children through observation and developmentally appropriate, culturally valid assessment tools, (2) documenting the information, and (3) reflecting on what is learned (Heritage 2010; Scott-Little, with Reschke 2022). Effective assessment begins with a careful examination of the purpose of the process, followed by informed decisions about what assessment strategy or tools to use based on the purpose (NRC 2008). The use of multiple assessment strategies gives children the best opportunity to demonstrate their competencies because one type of assessment tool may not adequately reflect a child's competencies (NAEYC 2020). Assessment should always be authentic—that is, by using age- and ability-appropriate approaches, tools and methods that are culturally relevant, and in a language the child understands (NAEYC 2020; Freeman & Schroeder 2022; Seitz 2023).

Using assessments from classrooms to plan, identify resources, and improve professional development to ensure all children are making progress in their development and learning

Assessment is an essential and ongoing part of quality programming in that the continual analysis of children's behavior and performance in a range of domains enhances children's learning and development (Tzuriel 2000). By using assessment data, programs can strategically guide planning and professional development to fully support each child's growth and improve learning outcomes (Bernhardt 2017). Analyses of assessment data provide essential insights into children's progress, helping educators understand where children are thriving and where additional support may be needed. This reflective process allows educators to tailor their curriculum to meet specific developmental needs, designing learning experiences that feel relevant, meaningful, and engaging for each child (Goldring & Berends 2008). To ensure that learning environments remain responsive, programs should regularly review assessment data, using this information to adjust strategies and explore innovative ways to adapt program culture to children's evolving needs (Bernhardt 2017). This approach goes beyond addressing children's needs alone—assessment data also serves as a foundation for targeted professional development (Hassel 1999). By identifying specific areas where educators may need additional skills or knowledge, programs can create opportunities for staff to grow, better equipping them to support children's development and fostering a culture of continuous improvement across the workforce (Egert et al. 2018).

Conducting assessments in partnership with families, ensuring open communication and collaboration

Early childhood educators should take intentional steps to make sure that all children are assessed fairly and in a way that best suits the individual child (Bagnato et al. 2014). Cultural expectations affect what children are expected to learn and how they demonstrate their knowledge (Banerjee & Guiberson 2012). Therefore, how children learn and how they demonstrate what they know are important assessment considerations (NRC 2008). Children's home language is another important consideration (Espinosa 2005). A multifaceted approach to assessment considers the whole child within the larger ecological contexts of early learning environment, family, and community (Blessing 2019). Because families observe their children in many different situations and because they are key partners in making decisions about their child, it is essential that families are included in the entire assessment process, from planning and implementation to the reporting of results (Epstein et al. 2004). Families should have opportunities to communicate their thoughts and perceptions regarding their child's development in their own language. Families can offer a broader picture of children's learning and development and provide insights that help the teacher interpret results. Only when guided by developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive assessment, with families involved, can the early childhood curriculum offer children the benefits intended.

STANDARD 6

Health: Promoting Health and Well-Being in Early Childhood Programs

Promoting the nutrition and health of children and staff and protecting them from illness

Attention to health practices in all aspects of early childhood programs contributes to quality. Of the six elements listed by Cryer (2003) in the professional definition of early care and education quality, two deal directly with health and safety: (1) healthful care, in a clean environment where sanitary measures are taken to prevent the spread of illness and where children have sufficient activity, rest, hygiene, and nutrition and (2) safe care, with sufficient, diligent adult supervision appropriate for children's ages and abilities as well as safe toys, equipment, and furnishings. Because the health and safety of children is of paramount concern to families, teachers, and the larger community, numerous research and public policy guidelines have been generated to ensure that children are kept safe. In Caring for Our Children, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP 2019) establishes research-based standards for out-of-home care facilities' health and safety practices, including a discussion of supervision, hygiene, and nutrition. That book and its companion collection of guidelines, Stepping Stones (NRCHSCC, AAP & APHA 2019), constitute an authoritative reference, with carefully documented research evidence for each standard and guideline. The development of key objectives within this Standard was guided by a wealth of research, policy statements, and guidelines on health, nutrition, and safety in childcare settings (Haupt et al. 2024; CDC 1996; Benjamin 2012; US DHHS 2000; AAP 2019; NRCHSCC, AAP & APHA, 2019). The intent of this Standard is to provide a rigorous set of expectations that serve to secure the health and safety of not only young children while they are cared for in early childhood environments, but also the staff and family members who regularly work at or visit the program.

Promoting the physical safety of children and staff, protecting them from injury while also encouraging healthy risk-taking that supports learning, exploration, and development

Attention to children's holistic health and safety is paramount to providing high-quality care that is safe, equitable, and engaging. Continuous and alert supervision of children is the most basic way to protect them from harm. Direct supervision means that adults can see and hear the children at all times, including when the children are in sleeping areas. Active supervision includes (a) knowing each child's abilities, (b) establishing clear and simple safety rules, (c) being aware of potential safety hazards, (d) standing in a strategic position, (e) scanning play activities and circulating, and (f) focusing on the positive rather than the negative to teach a child what is safe. Health, nutrition, and sanitation, together with child and adult safety are essential elements in providing high-quality early care and education (Harms et al. 1998; Cryer 2003; Harms et al. 2003). Among the NAEYC criteria for promoting health are practices related to diapering, sleep, handwashing, infectious disease control, constant supervision - especially near water - medication administration, and protecting children from unhealthy or extreme weather conditions. Support for these practices is

based on decades of work in public health and disease prevention (Haupt et al. 2024; Zinkernagel 2003). These most basic concerns must be met for a setting to reach a minimal threshold level of adequacy, even to permit the ethical placement of children in the environment. The physical adequacy of a setting alone, however, is not enough to ensure those features of structural and process quality that are needed to create an environment that is beneficial, rather than detrimental, to children's growth and advancement in the broad range of developmental domains. Exposure to toxic substances is most detrimental for the youngest children and is associated with a range of health consequences, including developmental delays, academic difficulties, and asthma. Exposure to environmental toxins, including unclean water, polluted air, and lead, disproportionately impacts Black, Indigenous, Latino/a, and other communities of color (Tessum et al. 2021).

Nurturing infants', children's, and staff's emotional, mental, and behavioral well-being

Children's mental and physical health and well-being lay the foundation for their development and learning (Clinton et al. 2016). The rate and severity of children's mental health issues are increasing (Slomski 2021; CDC, 2025). Children who have experienced trauma, loss, and grief or have a family history of mental illness may require clinical support from a licensed mental health professional. Early learning programs can be a bridge to mental health services by using assessment for timely identification, connecting families to outside services, and having qualified mental health support on staff (Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation 2023). It is necessary to prepare educators to identify signs of mental health concerns and implement program-wide practices that support well-being. Additionally, programs should establish strategies that promote staff wellness, recognizing that staff well-being is foundational to program quality. Studies show that educators' mental and emotional well-being is critical in delivering responsive and nurturing care to young children (Kwon et al. 2021; Whitebook et al. 2018). Focusing on staff well-being involves providing opportunities for professional development, access to mental health resources, and dedicated spaces for rest, reflection, and rejuvenation. Intentionally offering these opportunities equips educators to care for young children effectively and ensures they feel valued and supported in their roles (Kwon et al. 2012). Programs prioritizing staff wellness create an environment where educators can thrive professionally and emotionally, creating a ripple effect that enhances children's emotional and behavioral development.

STANDARD 7

Physical Environment: Designing Physical Environments That Are Safe, Engaging, and Accessible

Providing access to appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor spaces for both child-directed and teacher-guided activities

The physical environment exerts a pervasive and powerful influence over children's learning experiences, relationships, development, and independence (Brunsek et al. 2017; Obaki 2017; Nyabando & Evanshen 2022). When designed thoughtfully, the physical environment can contribute to the health and safety of all, setting the stage for everything that happens within the early learning program (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2023). Educators should continually evaluate the design of environmental spaces to support the ever-changing needs of children and families. A high-quality environment is visually appealing; welcomes children; engages them; provides space for individual, small-group, and large-group activities; and supports the program's philosophy and goals (Harms et al. 1998). Nature is an important component of early learning environments (Curtis & Carter 2003; Berris & Miller 2011; Trust for Learning 2023). Another important consideration is aligning the physical design of learning spaces with pedagogical needs to create environments that effectively support teaching and learning activities. Thoughtfully designed spaces tailored to instructional strategies can enhance child engagement, collaboration, and learning outcomes (Barrett et al. 2019). For instance, classrooms can include distinct zones for quiet reflection, active learning, and sensory regulation, addressing the diverse needs of students throughout the day.

Achieving this alignment requires more than good design. It demands teacher training and professional development to deepen understanding of spatial equity and the relationship between design and human behavior (Monahan 2002). Bridging the gap between physical space and pedagogy equips educators with the tools to create environments that support diverse learners, foster positive behaviors, and enrich educational experiences.

▌ **Ensuring indoor and outdoor spaces are adequately sized and accessible to all children, including children with disabilities and those who need individual accommodation**

Creation of a high-quality early childhood care and learning environment requires planning (Stoecklin 1997). Knowledge of the implications of building design, room arrangement, materials, and equipment can greatly contribute to programs' ability to positively influence children's development. The types of equipment, materials, and furnishing used in early childhood environments have implications for children's development and learning (Tegano et al 1996; Torelli & Durrett 1996; Isbell & Exelby 2001; Curtis & Carter 2003; Harms et al. 2003; US General Services Administration 2003; Schwall 2005). Principles of Universal Design for Learning guidelines and tools can be used to create inclusive early learning environments, supporting access and participation in many different types of settings, regardless of ability, disability, or developmental delay (Mistrett 2017; CAST 2018; Centre for Excellence in Universal Design 2020). Universal Design in the physical environment involves making sure that physical spaces are usable and practical for everyone, and ideally, individuals with and without disabilities can use these spaces without requiring special design or adaptations. Universal Design practices enable every child to take full advantage of the curriculum, be fully included in the learning community, and develop to their full potential (Persson et al. 2015; Moore et al. 2022, 2023).

▌ **Offering a physical environment that reflects the language(s) and cultural backgrounds of children and their families**

The physical environment of early care and learning environments reflects the goals, values, and expectations of programs (Greenman 2005). Environments can support relationships, staff members, children's development and independence, and contribute to a general community of care (Greenman 1988; Tegano et al. 1996; Torelli & Durrett 1996, 2002; Moore 2002; White 2004, 2005; Greenman 2005). A well-constructed physical environment conveys a profound sense of belonging, inclusion, and support, integral to the learning experience (Tanner 2009; Lippman 2010; Keary et al. 2023). Such environments should be welcoming and adaptable to represent the cultural and linguistic diversity of the children and families they serve. This inclusivity can be achieved through various strategies. For instance, incorporating and displaying culturally significant materials from the families served can ensure that children and their families feel recognized and valued (Tarrant & Huerta 2020). This not only helps children appreciate their own cultural backgrounds but also fosters respect and understanding of diverse cultures among all children, a crucial aspect of early childhood education and care.

STANDARD 8

Professionalism: Demonstrating Professionalism as Early Childhood Educators

▌ **Employing a staff that has education and knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions to support the development, learning, and well-being of all young children**

Adult behavior and adult-child interactions contribute to the development and learning of children (Huang et al. 2022; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Bowman et al. 2001; NASEM 2024). One of the most important components of high-quality early care and education programs lies with the quality of the teaching staff (IOM & NRC, 2015; Arnett 1989; Cassidy et al. 1995; Howes 1997; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 1999, 2000, 2002; Whitebook et al. 2001; Early Childhood Research & Practice 2002; Whitebook & Sakai 2004). Researchers have spent decades evaluating the role of formal education and specialized training of early childhood providers in the quality of care that children experience (Institute of Medicine 2015; Whitebook et al. 1990; Howes 1997; Whitehurst 2000; Burchinal et al. 2002; Whitebook & Sakai 2004; Hyson & Biggar 2005; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck 2005). It is clear that education and training matter; more highly educated and trained early childhood professionals provide more developmentally appropriate, nurturing, responsive, and generally better care and educational experiences than their peers with less education and training (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2000, 2002). In addition, reflective practice is an essential element of effective teaching (Jalongo & Isenberg 2004; Bottiani et al. 2018). By examining the ways in which their own personalities, family lives, and perspectives affect their interactions with children and families, staff strengthen their skills, which in turn strengthens the whole program (Kirby & Paradise 1992; Tertell et al. 1998; Oakes & Lipton 2003; Jalongo & Isenberg 2004). The willingness and success of teachers to integrate information they have learned about their teaching is one of the hallmarks of quality teachers.

Reflective practice demonstrates dedication and commitment to providing the best quality teaching. Being motivated to stay in the early childhood field and receive mentorship and supervision also contributes to effective teaching practices (National Professional Development Center on Inclusion 2008).

> **Ensuring fair and equitable access to professional development opportunities that help educators deliver high-quality early learning experiences and environments**

Equitable access to program-level support for educators to engage in professional development activities is of the utmost importance. Systemic inequities hinder people of color and those from under-resourced communities from accessing postsecondary education and professional development. Economic support for teacher education and training, participation in conferences, professional development activities, and preparation time further support staff members and benefit the program and children (Lipscomb et al. 2022; Bellm & Haack 2001). Building on this foundation, investing in all teachers' professional growth, development, and well-being ensures the continuity of building strong and meaningful relationships with children and their families. These relationships are integral to fostering a nurturing and supportive learning environment.

STANDARD 9

Leadership and Management: Supporting Staff, Children, and Families Through Effective Leadership and Management

> **Having policies, procedures and systems that reflect high-quality HR practices, are aligned with the program's vision and philosophy, and ensure developmentally appropriate experiences for young children**

Program management is responsible for overseeing staff, devising and implementing policies and procedures that support teaching staff, and ensuring that staff members are suitable for working with children and families. The development of written policies and the implementation of procedures in the areas of management, fiscal accountability, child and adult health and safety, personnel, and program accountability relate back to the establishment, maintenance, and continual improvement of program quality (Hedges 2023). The existence of and discussion of written policies and procedures for staff serve to reduce ambiguity and provide a framework for conflict resolution. The quality of work life for early childhood staff affects many aspects of care that influence the quality of the overall program (Bloom 1996; Whitebook & Bellm 1999; Bellm & Haack 2001; Whitebook & Sakai 2004; Whitebook et al. 2004; Bloom et al. 2005). Early care and education providers are often overworked and underpaid (Austin et. al 2019). Working to ensure adequate compensation is crucial for a number of reasons, one of which is that educator satisfaction and wellness are directly related to their ability to provide high-quality care for children and families. A supportive and respectful work environment contributes to staff feelings of satisfaction (Harms et al. 1998; Greenman 2005; Jack 2005; Kwon et al. 2021).

> **Maintaining financial records that help to make decisions and contribute to the program's long-term success**

Economic resources contribute to the overall quality of the program and support the retention of highly qualified and dedicated staff (McMullen & Alat 2002; Whitebook & Sakai 2004; Jack 2005). Financial resources also enable programs to secure high-quality teaching materials and maintain functional, engaging, and well-designed learning spaces. These investments elevate children's educational experiences and empower educators by equipping them with the tools and environments necessary to teach effectively (Bellm & Haack 2001). A well-resourced program signifies a commitment to excellence, attracting skilled professionals while fostering a culture of continuous growth and innovation. Programs with adequate financial resources are better positioned to provide opportunities for professional development, address staff needs, and create optimal learning conditions for children. Such investments not only ensure immediate benefits for the children served but also contribute to the long-term success of the broader educational community. Early childhood programs can maximize these benefits by implementing fiscal policies and procedures that boost financial health. Strategies that align with sound fiscal policies include establishing clear budgeting guidelines, ensuring accountability and transparency in revenue management, effectively tracking expenditures, and judicious use of resources (Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, n.d.; US DHHS, n.d.; Waldo Community Action Partners 2018).

Having policies that guide staff, educator, and volunteer orientation and continuous reflection, setting them up for success

Administrators of early care and education programs are responsible for satisfying a wide array of requirements to ensure a safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate environment for children and families as well as a supportive, enriching work environment for staff. Once staff have been hired, programs and staff members benefit from orientation and ongoing reflective practice. This includes written materials related to job responsibilities, benefits, hours, performance reviews, and expectations for behavior and involvement in professional development activities (Bellm & Haack 2001; Jack 2005). Leadership plays a critical role driving changes within the education system (Kagan & Bowman 1997; Genao & Mercedes 2021; Bloom et al. 2005; Bender Sebring et al. 2006). Effective leadership is team-based and collaborative, including staff in decision making. Staff inclusion translates into more effective practice, satisfaction, and change (Bellm & Hack 2001; Bloom et al. 2005; Jack 2005). This type of leadership style demonstrates program management's perception of staff as valued partners in the processes of program operation and improvement. Staff who feel valued as employees and participants express more job satisfaction (Bloom 1996). Effective leadership is informed by a system for ongoing program evaluation, accountability, and continuous improvement. Programs should regularly take stock of issues related to quality and equity, include diverse voices, and have a well-organized and comprehensive system in place that facilitates reflection and action (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003).

Implementing Policies, Procedures, and Systems that Support Confidentiality Regarding Information about Enrolled Children and Their Families

Clear and consistent policies for safeguarding information collected from children and families are crucial for maintaining mutual trust between families and early childhood programs (Bairu 2004). These policies ensure sensitive information is handled responsibly, ethically, and in alignment with professional standards. Program management is responsible for creating policies that comply with federal and state laws, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which grants parents and eligible children rights to access education records and restricts disclosure without consent (Surprenant & Miller 2022; US ED 2003; Bairu 2004), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which builds on FERPA and provides additional protections for children with disabilities (Surprenant & Miller 2022; US ED 2003; Bairu 2004). Programs must also tailor confidentiality policies to meet their specific needs (Gabay et al. 2021).

Confidentiality involves protecting personal information—such as health, demographic, and education records—from unauthorized access (Gabay et al. 2021). Policies should ensure sensitive information is shared only on a need-to-know basis (Bairu 2004; Solberg 2024). Families must be informed about how their data will be used and shared, and except in cases where a child's safety is at risk, they retain control over their information (See "Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators"). Information technology systems streamline data management while safeguarding confidentiality through technical controls, such as password-protected databases, secure transmission, and defined protocols for retention and destruction (Gabay et al. 2021; Croft 2024). Programs should collect only necessary data and designate personnel to oversee security and compliance (OECD 2023; Gabay et al. 2021). Regular staff training on confidentiality reduces accidental breaches (US ED 2003; Bairu 2004), and management should update policies to reflect changes in laws, technology, and operations, fostering accountability (Bairu 2004).

STANDARD 1

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